

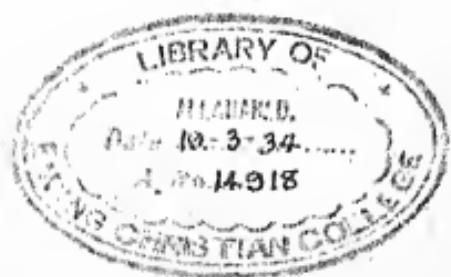
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THE SIGN OF THE GLOVE

BY
CARLTON DAWE



285

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THE SIGN OF THE GLOVE

CHAPTER I

THE TEMPTER

THOUGH the public memory is upon occasion notoriously short-lived, there may still be those who have a vague recollection of the sudden death of Sir Everard Clanwell while on a voyage from India to England. Sir Everard, who was Governor of Bombay, was on his way home, ostensibly on leave, but in reality to report to the Imperial authorities on the state of unrest in his government. It was also known to the initiated that he did not always see eye to eye with the Viceroy, a well-meaning man and doubtless politically honest, but scarcely the one to handle a national crisis with the necessary firmness. Or so his enemies averred, and cried loudly for his recall, a cry which failed utterly to stampede the men in power.

The cable which had informed the world of Sir Everard's death, and which the world had merely glanced at and forgotten, had briefly announced that his Excellency had died of a heart attack and had been buried at sea. As has been said, the majority of the people at home read this message with their

early cup of tea, or at the breakfast-table, and then forgot all about it. But there were many others who did not forget, among them being a few intimate personal friends of the dead man, and certain officials high in the government. They began to ask questions among themselves, and out of those questions arose more questions and much subsequent mystery.

On the face of it, the cause of Sir Everard's death was clear. But it was also known to his intimates that he suffered severely from malaria, and that, doubtless among other remedies, he had been accustomed to inject quinine. This would account for the numerous punctures on his body discovered by the ship's doctor after death, and proved entirely to the satisfaction of that good man that the Governor had probably hastened his end by a too free indulgence of the drug.

Naturally nothing of all this was allowed to be made public. Scandals in high places are not conducive to general confidence. But those who were cognizant of his Excellency's activities in the suppression of rebellion believed they saw something sinister behind the tragedy. For one thing, none of them had ever heard of his having a weak heart, while it was known that he had incurred bitter hatred in his government by reason of the firm stand he had taken against the extremists, and that more than once an attempt had been made on his life. Therefore they scouted the theory of a too free indulgence of the drug. A man like Sir Everard, so they reiterated, would not have committed such a fatal blunder. On the other hand, it might not have added to his Excellency's reputation should the story of those injections

be made known. For like all prominent men he had enemies even in his own camp, and exaggeration might have cast a slur on his memory not easily removed. From the injection of quinine to the acquiring of a reputation as a drug addict was but a short step, and there were not a few who were ready to take it. So that it may be said Sir Everard's reputation hung in the balance; and as burial at sea had precluded the possibility of a post-mortem, it would appear as though the factions were to be eternally divided.

* * * * *

In spite of a profound attachment to George Mayford, I still maintain that he is the most inconsiderate friend any man could possibly have. No sooner had I recovered from one desperate plight,¹ and got the dearest girl in the world to promise she would marry me, than he was at me again. And it caine about in this way.

I was alone in my rooms in Cork Street. Albert, my trusty friend and henchman, had gone to the Pictures, and I was spreading myself out before a plate of sandwiches and a bottle of beer preparatory to the writing of a letter to the "dearest girl, etc.," when suddenly my telephone rang. I looked at it and frowned. Albert, before going out, had suggested disconnecting it, knowing that my amatory epistles needed the utmost concentration, and I had merely waved aside the suggestion. Now I regretted it, for I cannot write a love letter with one hand and hold a receiver in the other. Though I may have indulged in a few serious enterprises in my time, this business

¹ See the story "Leathermouth."

of love-letter writing was about the most serious of them all. That a girl, and *such* a girl, should agree to take me for better or worse was so incredible a happening that I was still wondering if it could be true. What she saw in me is, and always will be, a matter of curious conjecture. I was no beauty; indeed I had a mouth which had earned me a derisive nickname, and if the truth must be told I had shied of women, not that I contemned their smiles, but because I always noticed they were given elsewhere. I won't say I did not regret this, while trying to think it didn't matter. Then Julia came along. Being an exceedingly sensible young woman, she naturally discovered certain merits which had escaped her less discerning sisters.

Meanwhile, and much to my annoyance, the telephone bell continued to ring. After all, it might be somebody on the wrong number. In any case, that ringing had to stop, and there was apparently only one way of stopping it. In answer to my brusque "Well?" a voice gurgled in my ear, "So glad you're at home, darling."

"But I'm not; I'm out."

"So it would seem. What about dining with me?"

"I have dined."

"Already?"

"I'm dining now."

"All alone! What a pity. I'd better come round and join you."

"Not if you value your life."

"But I don't, where you're concerned. Are you going to be long over it?"

"Over what?"

" That letter."

" Clever, aren't you ? "

" I've written 'em myself."

" Not like mine ; you couldn't."

" Give her my love, and tell her that I am still your guardian angel."

" We both hate the sight of you."

" I know. Well, I'm sorry you're out. By the way, how do you sign it ? If you're stuck, just ring me up."

" I'd like to wring your neck."

" Girls are marvellous, aren't they ? " he gurgled.

" Oh, go to . . . "

I snapped him off, but could not as easily rid myself of that gurgle, or the picture of him at the other end of the line, red-faced and smiling. Our telephonic conversations were usually carried on in this cheerily polite manner, though since I had become engaged they had taken, at least on his part, an added tone of amusement which did not entirely meet with my approval. He seemed to think it outrageously funny that I, a confirmed bachelor, should at last seriously consider entering the matrimonial state, or that any girl in her senses should seriously consider making the experiment with me, I never knew which. But it did not strike me as being funny at all, and I am sure it never appealed as such to Julia.

The person who had so facetiously questioned me on the telephone was an old friend of mine, George Mayford by name, a man of considerable standing in the political department of Scotland Yard. He and I had been concerned in more than one matter of importance, and but lately had successfully solved

the mystery of the strange disappearance of that eminent financier Sir Julius Ashlin.

However, having as I thought disposed of him, I finished my beer and sandwiches, lit a pipe, sat at my desk, and began my daily epistle in a vein of the utmost enthusiasm. Julia and I had promised each other that we would write every day, if it was only a few lines. She was over in New York "settling up," as she called it, and from what I could gather the lawyers were driving her mad with quite unnecessary delays. They certainly drove me mad. I hadn't wanted her to go at all. Let the estate take care of itself. Her brother would look after her interests, and I was not by any means a pauper. But she had some scheme afoot of which she would not tell me, though probably I had an inkling. Naturally I was all for marriage straight away, but she had some bee in her bonnet, and when a woman starts with one bee it usually ends with a swarm.

So away she went and Albert and I were left alone once more. Edna, my sister, and Julia's brother John, whom I always called "Wally," had married and disappeared somewhere on his yacht. I had hoped for a double marriage, but Wally refused to wait or be swayed by his sister's whims. So I could only hope those lawyers over in America would get a move-on and make me the happiest man in the world. After a rather stormy life my one desire was to settle down and live at peace with all the world. Julia had made me promise that I would undertake no more perilous adventures, a promise I willingly gave; for now, more than ever, I had no wish to encounter mutilation or sudden death. This world

may have lacked certain perfections, but just then I was in no humour to find fault with it.

But it would seem that I was not to be left in peace, for not long after I had brusquely dismissed George Mayford on the telephone there came a ring at my door bell, which immediately grew so insistent that I had to answer it, much to my intense annoyance. Nor did that annoyance appreciably lessen when I saw Mayford grinning at me from the doormat.

"May I come in?" he said.

"No, you may not."

He continued to grin in that red-faced way of his as he crossed the threshold and carefully closed the door after him.

"Thought you might be a bit lonely, Peter."

"And as usual thought wrong. I am under the impression that I told you I was out."

"So am I; that's what made me come round. It is not good for man to be alone. Finished all the beer?"

"Yes."

"Where's Albert?"

"Gone to the Pictures."

"Why didn't you go with him? Would have reminded you of America, cowboys and all."

I noticed the quick glance he shot in the direction of my writing-table, and the smile which accompanied it. "But perhaps you didn't need such a reminder?"

I produced the whisky and soda and a box of cigars. He helped himself freely, the bubbles sputtering under his nose. "Here's to us, my cherub," he gurgled.

"Well," I admitted, "I suppose I must endure."

"Quite a lot," he said. "Molly has been making

tender inquiries. You wouldn't believe how fond that girl is of you." Molly was his wife.

"No, I wouldn't."

"She's a tremendous admirer of Julia's," he continued in his provoking way.

"Evidently a woman of discernment."

"Or she wouldn't have married me. Have you fixed the happy day, or are those American lawyers still fooling about? But I can see from your manner that they are. Well, it gives you time to look round."

At this I pricked up my ears. That "look round" sounded extremely ominous coming from him.

"What do you mean by that?"

"This waiting is a dreary business," he said. "I was wondering how you intend to pass the interregnum."

"By purchasing my trousseau."

"And in between?"

"By dodging the inquisitive."

"Impossible. A man who's going to marry the Wallington millions is doomed to premature publicity. I understand the papers over there are already screaming in flaring headlines."

"What about?"

"Many things. Among others they are beginning to refer to you as a 'mystery man,' which is about the finest form of publicity that modesty can hope to achieve. You'll soon be rivalling Greta Garbo."

"I take it you didn't break in on me to retail such stuff?"

"No, Peter, I didn't. The fact of the matter is, I'm a bit worried."

"But why worry me?"

"Because you're always so sympathetic, and you have such a discerning intellect."

"I thought I was a blunderer?"

"An inspired blunderer, if ever there was one. Have you given the matter any further consideration?"

"I have only one matter under consideration at present, and you know what that is."

"Naturally that comes first; but I hoped you might have found time to glance at the papers I sent you."

"Well, I haven't."

"A pity. You would have found them most interesting. You see, there are those who believe that the death of Sir Everard might not have been due to heart failure."

"They're welcome to it, whoever they are, or whoever Sir Everard was."

"Sir Everard Clanwell was Governor of Bombay."

"I am not interested in the Governor of Bombay."

"But I am. The more one considers the proposition the more intriguing it becomes."

"I've finished with intrigue. A hundred Governors of Bombay may die mysteriously for all I care. I promised Julia . . ."

"I know, old man," he soothed; "and a promise to such a girl is sacred. I wouldn't have you break it for the world. At the same time, most of us are bound to take a little interest in the welfare of our country. A pity you never looked at those papers."

"Well, I did just glance at them," was my ungracious and reluctant admittance.

"And what conclusion did you come to?" he purred in his exasperating, ingratiating way.

"I was not sufficiently interested to come to any sort of conclusion."

"A pity," he repeated again, "because you might have blundered on to a solution of the problem."

"Look here, George, if you employ these stereotyped methods in all your investigations, is it any wonder that you are continually finding yourself up against a dead-end?"

"What I particularly enjoy about our conferences," he said, "is their extreme frankness. You never leave one in the slightest doubt as to your meaning."

"Then get this clear. If you've come here with the intention of roping me in, you're wasting your time and mine. I promised Julia that I would have nothing more to do with you or your department, and I mean to keep my word. I am not interested in the late Governor of Bombay, and I don't care a rap if he committed suicide or was murdered."

"Personally I'm one with you, but there's the official side of the case, and that's not lightly to be dismissed. You see, Sir Everard was what is known politically as a 'strong man,' and as a consequence was both hated and feared by the seditionists. It is even whispered that but for higher influences he would have dealt summarily with the agitators. More than once his life had been attempted."

"And he dies quietly on board ship of a heart attack."

"Ostensibly."

"Why shouldn't he?"

"Apart from his malaria Sir Everard was a healthy

man. Those who knew him best discredit the weak-heart theory. They even hint that some emissary of Gandhi may have travelled on the ship, and that he . . . ”

“ But Gandhi is not a murderer ; the worst you can say of him is that he’s an infernal nuisance. After all, his agitation for Dominion Status, or even complete independence, is natural enough.”

“ Quite so, from his point of view ; unhappily it doesn’t square with ours. While we remain in India we must rule ; there can be no compromise with rebellion.”

“ I thought our policy was all compromise.”

“ If you call it a policy. What we have particularly to remember is this, that every movement, political or otherwise, breeds its fanatics, people who would murder and willingly suffer martyrdom for the cause.”

“ In short, what would be patriotism in us is rebellion in them ? ”

“ Exactly. But that is the larger issue, and must be left in the hands of those who sit in high places. The rights and wrongs of the case are no concern of mine. When you were soldiering you may have questioned the wisdom of certain staff orders, but you never dreamt of disobeying them. Authority tells me there is a doubt as to the manner in which Sir Everard Clanwell met his death, and suggests that my department should investigate.”

“ I can imagine no department so worthy of their confidence.”

“ But in these political matters ”—he did not even pull a face at my compliment—“ one is always handicapped by conditions. Audacity must give way to

circumspection. If we want a certain suspect watched we do not put a uniformed constable on the job. You see, assuming that Sir Everard did not die a natural death, it opens up a vast field of speculation. While it may have been a case of private revenge, it may, on the other hand, be the result of a serious conspiracy to assassinate the heads of the Indian Government. Awhile ago, as you may remember, an attack was made on the Viceroy himself. From certain information which has come our way we are inclined to think that some such conspiracy as I have mentioned is afoot."

"Doubtless you will know how to deal with it."

"Doubtless," he agreed as he struck a fresh match, his cigar having gone out while he was speaking. "By the way, have you ever heard of Leo Jusk?"

"Never, and don't want to."

For I saw plainly the meaning of this circumlocution, and was not impressed by it. By insidious questioning, and the springing of surprises, he would arouse a curious interest in the unsophisticated. I, however, was too conversant with George and his methods to let him get away with that sort of stuff. Moreover, I was determined to show him that I had no further intention of disturbing the precious peace I was at the moment enjoying. Besides, hadn't I given Julia a sacred promise that I would avoid George Mayford and his schemes as I would the plague? It was only on this condition that she agreed to leave me for awhile.

But he was artful, not to say exceedingly subtle, in his methods. He had a detached, almost impersonal way of telling a tale that bred interest in spite of one's

determination not to be interested. While professing to approve of my resolve to retire into obscurity, he nevertheless was insidiously attempting to undermine it. I knew all his tricks, and though he was not ignorant of my knowledge it affected him no more than my sarcasms. Nor did he think it necessary to alter his method, nor was he reticent to indulge in the grossest flattery if it suited him. That he had a real liking for me, as I for him, went without saying. We had been friends for years, from the old Cambridge days, through the war and through the peace, if peace it could be called, which I was frequently inclined to doubt. Certainly he made peace for me a very problematical quantity. For I had been of service to him more than once, and he laboured under the delusion that he might call on me at will.

But I was determined to have no more of him. I had finished with intrigue and its possible perilous consequences. After many heart-burnings and innumerable regrets I had at last discovered a woman who found no reproach in my ugly mug, who, in fact, didn't really think it was ugly at all, and who promised a joy for which my arid bachelor heart had yearned in secret. And I knew he had come to blur the bright prospect. What to him were my dreams of Julia and joy? That marvellous girl mine, the mother of my children, a lifelong pal and partner! The dream was so precious that he should not destroy it; nobody should, who was not eager to die.

"Do you mean to tell me," he said, "that you have never heard of Leo Jask?"

"That's just what I do mean to tell you."

"Do you never read your newspapers?"

"No," I snapped.

"But a little while back," he continued, ignoring this denial, "when the great trouble was in China, the papers were full of him. He is the Moscow emissary who stirred up the Reds in Canton."

"Let him."

"Quite so. While he confined his activities to China we were observant, if nothing more, but the beggar's in India now and at his old games."

"Isn't that a job for the Government of India?"

"You forget that we have recognized the Soviet, and that such recognition carries with it certain obligations. I am not arguing about the wisdom of that recognition. But this we do know: when the politicians blunder the army is called to clear up the mess. Do you believe that the British Empire is nearing dissolution?"

"It probably soon will be if the compassionate tendencies of certain people are not checked."

"Not a few seem to be working strenuously to that end. Already the thin end of the wedge has been inserted in Egypt as well as India, and with each successive blow it naturally sinks deeper. No need for me to enumerate the disastrous results of concession; they are self-evident."

"My dear George, you are boring me to death with this old stuff. Let us talk about Julia."

"Don't be an idiot," he cooed. "What's to become of Julia, and you, and all of us, if the British Empire crumbles? You see my point?"

"No I don't, and I don't want to see it, and I don't want any more of you. The mail goes tomorrow, and I haven't finished my letter."

" You see," he continued, quite unperturbed by this outburst, " our enemies are many and clamorous, and believe that with the disintegration of the British Empire the world-revolution will become an accomplished fact. Some may think that would not be much of a calamity ; on the other hand, there are those who undoubtedly believe it would be. But that's beside the mark. Our job is to see that it doesn't happen."

" Our job ? "

" Of course. Naturally I assume that now more than ever you object to having your throat cut by the irresponsible Leo Jasks of the world."

" I'll take a chance."

" Then what about Julia's ? "

This was another matter. In extreme despair I asked, " What has all this to do with Sir Everard Clanwell ? "

" That's what I hope to discover—with your assistance."

" You can count me out."

" I have no intention of doing anything of the kind. Once before I came to you with some such mission, and you jumped down my throat in your most gracious manner. You had done your bit ; let the younger generation carry on. The war-weary veteran had no other ambition than to sleep peacefully o' night. Yet consider. But for me would you ever have found the incomparable one ? "

" You're a nasty fellow, George, and I hate you."

" I know ; help a lame dog over a stile and he turns and bites you. All the same, I'd like you to meet Lady Clanwell and her charming daughter."

"Take the first airplane to India, I suppose?"

"Oh dear, no; they're in London. Came over three months ago when things were looking a bit serious. I can assure you they're really anxious to meet you."

"To meet me?"

"You see, in a way I've already introduced you."

"Do you know, George——"

"Yes, yes; but what else could I do? Of course it needn't go any farther."

"It's not."

"They'll be frightfully disappointed."

"You must express my regrets in your own inimitable manner."

"You understand, Peter, that I fully appreciate your present resolve. It merely struck me at the time that if by any chance you did hear what they have to say you might get an idea which would be of service to me. They're at the May Fair for a week or so. I suppose you always post those letters yourself?" he added mockingly.

"You know, you're getting quite impossible."

"You can easily drop in on your way to the pillar-box," he continued. "They'll be delighted to see you. All I ask is that you try to live up to my eulogies. Which reminds me; you must have met Derek Clanwell in Palestine?"

"Must I?"

"He was at Gaza, where you stopped that bullet."

Instinctively I pressed my thigh at the recollection. Occasionally, when the weather was damp and cold, it still gave me a twinge.

"I have no recollection of him."

"Well, it may not have been Gaza. I suppose I've got that place on the brain all through thinking of you. Anyway, he was killed out there, poor chap. It came out when I casually mentioned that you had been through that campaign."

"What else did you casually mention, Mr. Long-tongue?"

"That you were really one of the most extraordinary fellows in the Service, though no one would think it to look at you."

"But I am not in the Service, thank God!"

"I never explain more than is really necessary."

"Nor have I the faintest intention of entering it," I added.

"The loss will be ours, and the joy of Leo Jask great; for, as he knows the East well, both Near and Far, it's just possible that he has heard of Leather-mouth."

"Did you mention that name?"

"Good Lord, no."

It was a name I had acquired during a certain political mission in the Near East, and was my particular detestation. Moreover, it was a gross libel, as Julia would tell you. She didn't think my mouth leathery, whatever opinion others may have formed of it. I saw him smile, and knew exactly what he was thinking. He thought because I had succumbed more than once to his insidious solicitations that he again had me in a cleft stick. But I was determined that this should not be. Apart from my promise to Julia, I had no further wish to be embroiled in strife, political or otherwise. Being by nature a peaceful

man, and one who would rather avoid a quarrel than enter it, I had longed all my life to live at ease and die secure between a pair of clean sheets. To a man who for months on end has been denied the joy of clean sheets the thought becomes an obsession. Those who liked a violent death were welcome to it. For myself, I had other dreams, and had always had them, though some malign fate seemed to take a fiendish delight in thwarting me.

However, that was all done with. If an enemy of mine still remained in the world I freely forgave him, and hoped for his forgiveness. If men would continue to plot and cut each other's throat, let them get on with it. It was a bad end anyway, and made no sort of appeal to me.

And all the time I was thinking George Mayford was smiling in that quiet, red-faced way of his, and slyly regarding me from under his jutting ginger brows. He was a big heavy red man who might one day succumb to a fit of apoplexy, and so I often warned him. I warned him once more as he gulped his whisky and soda, but, as usual, without effect. Then I looked at the sheet of notepaper lying on my desk and sighed.

"Quite so," he said. "Give my love to her, and tell her I'm looking after you like a mother. Heard from Wally lately?"

I shook my head. Wally, otherwise John Christopher Wallington, Julia's brother, had, much to the surprise of us all, fallen for my sister Edna, married her in haste, and yanked her off on his yacht for a honeymoon cruise.

"I think he'd like to be in on this." George threw

out this feeler with an indifference which I knew to be assumed.

"In on what?"

"Just a thought."

"Then get rid of it. Wally's as keen on the quiet life as I am."

"I know you're both a pair of lambs who'd bleat with terror if a dog looked at you. Well, I'd better be going."

"So soon!"

He rose, stretched himself, lit a fresh cigar and dropped a couple more in his waistcoat pocket.

"My time is valuable," he said.

"To whom?"

"My country."

"Lucky country."

"I have to work for a living."

"Lucky beggar!"

"Well, think it over, Peter, and if you want any further information ring me up. Shall I send along Jask's dossier?"

"No, thanks."

"It's pretty voluminous as it stands. What it will be like when you've finished with him I dread to think."

With that he left, and at last I was free to begin my letter. Yet it was odd how his red face would stare at me from the written page. Whenever I wrote "darling" he seemed to look up at me and grin, and with diabolical delight coo the word in that mocking way of his. Even Leo Jask—curse him!—had the impertinence to intrude; a squat, bearded Russian with a Mongol face. Or so I assumed. Curse him anyway for his presumption.

I wrote :

" The red-faced tempter has been, and failed. He is still as subtle and insidious as the serpent. But what do I care for all the Leo Jasks in the world ! Of course you don't know Leo ; neither do I, and don't intend to. Darling, when are you coming to me ? Nevermind about those troublesome old lawyers. If you don't take the first boat that leaves New York I shall take the first one that leaves Southampton. As you know, I'm a patient man, void of all passion and guile. Yet I begin to see things redder than George Mayford's face when I think of this delay. Take pity on my loneliness and the temptations which surround me. You know, Julia, you're the most marvellous girl in the world, and I never cease to wonder how you . . . "

CHAPTER II

I MEET DOCTOR LAL.

THOSE who have read the previous adventure of one "Leathermouth" will need no introduction to Albert Floyd, who still resolutely remained in my service, though as a fact he was more friend and confidant than servant. You see, we had been through a bit together since he first came to me as my batman in Egypt, and through various trials and tribulations had proved his worth in many ways. I rather think he was under the impression that I needed a nurse, and as a consequence had settled down as protector of my still wayward infancy.

As he entered the room with my early cup of tea he found me pacing restlessly up and down. Beyond his usual deferential, "Good morning, sir," he made no remark, but I saw him look at me in a manner I remembered so well ; a questioning, almost eager look, as though he knew that there was something in the wind, and that in my own good time I would tell him all about it.

As a matter of fact I had not slept too well. After writing my letter to Julia, and posting it myself, I had returned to my rooms, lit a pipe, and tried to read. But for once in a way I failed to concentrate

on what I was reading, which was chiefly due to the malign influence of George Mayford. Why had he come to bore me with his stories of the late Governor of Bombay and the very-much-alive Leo Jask? Though Sir Everard Clanwell might have been a most worthy man, a devoted patriot and admirable public servant, I was not aware of any particular interest in him. As for Mr. Leo Jask, he was nothing more than a name. Nor did the fact that he had been known to stir up the Reds in Canton, and that at present he was busy in India, cause him to loom portentously. There were those in India who would, or should, know how to curtail his activities. And yet the fellow hovered above my pillow like some malignant imp, and when he wasn't worrying my dreams the ghost of Sir Everard Clanwell gloomed at me with hollow eyes. And inextricably mixed with it all was his son Derek and Palestine. "Killed out there, poor chap——" like many other poor chaps. The persistence of these shadows annoyed me, and when I finally awoke in the morning that feeling of annoyance was by no means allayed; which probably accounted for my appearance in dressing-gown and slippers when Albert brought the early cup of tea.

About an hour later he reappeared with my shaving-water, and noiselessly busied himself in the sitting-room while I proceeded to lather my face. Usually we chatted a little during the process of dressing, and at the subsequent breakfast; but this morning we both seemed more reserved than usual, though, as I occasionally looked his way, I saw him watching me most intently.

"Pictures any good?" I ventured.

"Most unconvincing," he said. "Any more coffee, sir?"

"No, thank you."

He brought my pipe, already charged, and struck a match. I took the morning paper from him and opened it. He hung round.

"Mr. Mayford paid me a visit last night," I informed him, without looking up from the paper.

"Indeed, sir. I hope he is quite well?"

"I think so."

Insensibly I knew that he was still waiting, and that probably my reply had deepened the wrinkles at the corner of his mouth into one of his grim, respectful smiles.

"By the way, Albert," I asked casually, "have you ever heard of Leo Jask?"

He thought for a moment or so. "Can't say I have, sir."

"Or Sir Everard Clanwell?"

"Do you mean the Governor of Bombay, him that died at sea?"

"Yes."

"I read about it in the papers, sir, an' something else, which I've forgotten."

"Did we ever meet in Palestine an officer called Clanwell?"

"I can't call him up, sir."

"Mr. Mayford said he was killed at Gaza—or somewhere."

"Probably somewhere, sir. Did Mr. Mayford—"

He paused. I glanced up at him. There was a sudden eager look in his eyes.

"He did; but we're not taking any, Albert."

"No, sir."

"We are not interested in Leo Jask or his machinations."

"No, sir."

"Or defunct Governors of Bombay."

"Not in the least, sir. All that sort of thing don't appeal to us."

"Having turned the sword into a ploughshare
—"

"It looks like agriculture and a quiet life."

I nodded. He still lingered knowing that there was more to come. Though aware of his presence I assumed indifference. He moved about quietly. I never knew such a fellow for doing the unnecessary thing in a perfectly decorous manner.

"Any orders, sir."

"No, I don't think so. Things are a bit slack, Albert."

"We've known 'em livelier, sir."

I thought he sighed, though being far from prone to such weakness. I looked up. His eyes were shining expectantly, or with recollection, I was not certain which. Tall, lean, muscular, head up, shoulders square, he was a fine specimen of a man.

"But all that's over. It's the quiet life now."

"Yes, sir."

But the thought did not appear to stir enthusiasm, and I feared he was too much of a fighter fully to appreciate the blessings of peace.

Then suddenly the telephone rang. He looked at me; I nodded.

"It's Mr. Mayford, sir."

"Oh!"

I rose and went to the instrument. Albert discreetly retired.

"That you, darling?" mockingly came the well-known voice. He usually began this way, and continued with heavy facetiousness unless unceremoniously checked. I breathed a remonstrance. "So glad," he gurgled. "Have you seen *The Times* this morning?"

"No."

"Then look it up. There's a most interesting article in it on the state of affairs in India. Incidentally it has something to say about our friend Leo Jask."

"Now, look here . . ."

"I am looking, and I see possibilities in the fellow."

"Would you like to hear my real opinion of you?"

"I know it, and am flattered. By the way, Lady Clanwell wants to know when she may expect you."

"Convey my compliments to Lady Clanwell . . ."

"I have, and told her that if you could possibly manage it she might expect you between four and five. You'll find her an extremely nice woman; and as for Cynthia . . ."

"Cynthia?"

"That's the daughter. If I didn't already belong to the most marvellous girl in the world—barring one, of course—I should become hopelessly insane."

"You are."

"But I know you're quite safe, otherwise I should not submit you to such a trying ordeal. So glad to find you awake. *Adios!*"

Pertinacious George. And he thought I was falling for it! I couldn't help smiling. Not on your life, George. I had finished with you, intrigue, and all

the other ills which arose from such a connection. My day of adventure was over. On the other side of the Western Ocean was someone who had promised me a happiness of which I had scarcely dared to dream, and I was taking no further risks.

Albert re-entered the room, an envelope in his hand, which I recognized at once. It was Julia's cablegram. She was always sending them, bless her! between the intervals of letter-writing. This one said : "Love, darling," just to show that she was thinking of me. It was wonderful that any woman should call me "darling," me with a complexion like a piece of tanned leather and two lines like cart ruts that ran down each side of my mouth. Unperturbed by Albert's presence I kissed the precious greeting.

"It's from Miss Julia," I explained. As though he didn't know!

"She is coming, sir?"

"Not yet, I'm afraid."

"Perhaps it's just as well, sir."

"Just as well?"

"If we're going to consider Mr. Mayford's proposition."

"We are going to do nothing of the sort," I snapped. "We've finished with Mr. Mayford and his propositions. It's the quiet life, Albert, for you and me. By the way, you might—— No, never mind." I was going to ask him to get me a copy of *The Times*, but on second thoughts decided that I would not even look at the article George Mayford had recommended. What did it matter to me what the newspapers said about Leo Jask while Julia was calling me "darling" from the other side of the ocean?

"I shall lunch at the club," I informed him when I was ready to go out. "After that; well, I don't know. You can take the car if you like and run down to Sevenoaks to see your mother. By the way, how's that other affair progressing?"

That "other affair" referred to a certain love episode which had befallen the gallant fellow. Though not easily embarrassed he betrayed an undoubted symptom of indecision.

"Thank you, sir. I'll take the car and have a look at the old lady. She's always glad to see her soldier boy. I believe she still thinks I'm in the Army. Gets a bit mooney-like at times. But as for that other business— Well, I dunno. If you an' Miss Julia hadn't . . . But I suppose it's catching. Flo's a handsome girl, but a bit too strenuous, if you know what I mean, sir. Likes playing the sergeant-major; and I don't quite fancy digging with a sergeant-major all the rest of my days."

"But you'll both come and live with us."

"Ah, sir, a man never knows what'll become of him once he ties himself up to a woman, especially if she's got a touch of the sergeant-major about her. Still," he added with a grim smile, "there's no commitment, an' I'm not jumpin' first an' lookin' after. Besides, there's you, sir."

"How do I come in?"

"The last words Miss Julia said to me on Waterloo platform were, 'Mind you look after the colonel, Albert.' An' what I want to know is, how can a man serve two masters, even if one is only a woman?"

I strolled round to the club and into the smoke-room, where I ordered a mild *apéritif*—and *The Times*!

Decidedly weak of me, I admit, especially after certain promises to myself that that was the one paper I would be particular to avoid. And then I found myself glancing down the article and looking for the name of Leo Jask. And there it was large as life, with a few remarks on his revolutionary tendencies. "Notorious emissary of the Soviet," he was labelled, who, it would seem, had "mysteriously arrived in India," and, at the moment, was supposed to be spreading Communist propaganda among the tribesmen of the North-West Frontier. From certain comments that followed it was clearly the writer's opinion that India could do very well without the presence of Mr. Jask.

Not much here to startle thought or stimulate apathy. On the whole a most uninspiring article, a mere *réchauffé* of facts with which every reader was more or less acquainted. What George Mayford had hoped from my perusal of the screed I can't imagine.

Then Hughie Tabran, known as "Tabbie" to his intimates, floated in and ordered a second *apéritif*. He was a nice lad with apparently no cares in the world. Probably a bit given to the joy of life, not to be marvelled at considering his circumstances and his age. He could not have been a day over twenty-five or six, and as a consequence quite possibly regarded me as an aged and infirm wash-out. However, he seemed to favour me on the whole, which was a compliment much appreciated.

"Haven't seen you for ages," he said as he dropped into the chair next to mine. "Wondered what had become of you. Tom Chancellor was saying only the other day—"

"Tom is always saying."

"Wondered if you were married, or something."

"Not yet. And you?"

Suddenly serious, he looked at me, and then began earnestly: "Look here, old chap, you're a man of experience." I feared the compliment presaged something unpleasant.

"Not with women," I quickly assured him.

"But you've knocked about a bit in out-of-the-way places, come up against all sorts of queer characters, and if rumour is to be credited—"

"Don't place too much reliance on it."

"I hope I know where to draw the line."

But did he? Though he was rather a nice lad I was in no mood to suffer him on that account. He, however, drew his chair a little closer, suggesting a confidence I was not anxious to enjoy. The fact is, I was suffering from a restlessness almost bordering on irritation, which he would not understand, which no one, with the exception of Albert, could possibly understand. That confidential movement of his was rather intimidating.

"What I want to ask you," he began in a lowered voice, "is this: 'in your travels have you ever met . . .'" He broke off suddenly, frowning. Then, under his breath, "Here comes that colossal bore Woodward. What about lunching together at a small table? Then I can tell you all about it."

But if I had to be bored I saw little difference between Woodward and Tabbie Tabran, and as I was in no mood to undergo the ordeal I quickly declined. Then Woodward blundered up, much to Tabbie's disgust, and began to make himself agreeable in his

own peculiar chatty way. I rose and hurriedly beat a retreat. Yet, had I heard it, I might have found Tabran's confidence rather interesting.

So being driven from the club, and from the luncheon I had promised myself, I wandered rather aimlessly along till the doors of a smart eating-place in Piccadilly yawned invitingly. Fortunately a small table, partly screened by some green growth, was found for me in a corner, and there I sat in solitary state and thought of Julia and the great time that was coming ; and might have continued to think of her had I not suddenly caught the word "Jask." Immediately I was all attention. Jask ! Who among these smart chatterers was interested in that mysterious person ?

I sat very still, hoping to hear a little more ; but the people on the other side of the greenery never raised their voices again, though I could see that they were leaning across the table and speaking earnestly. They were a man and a woman. The man's back being to me I saw nothing but his head and shoulders and his sleek black hair, but through the fronds I could see the woman fairly well. She was fair, almost pallid of complexion, and smartly dressed. Her hat, black in colour, was one of those close-fitting contraptions, or confections, or whatever it is they call them, which worn well back give the forehead a bulging appearance. I also saw that her eyebrows had been plucked after the manner of the film star. And she was interested in Leo Jask, or so I imagined, never dreaming that there could be two of that name in the world who would be discussed in such a place.

Eavesdropping is probably not the most noble of

occupations, though there are occasions when the sin seems to sit lightly on one's conscience. I certainly eavesdropped just then for all I was worth, and was greatly chagrined at my lack of further success.

However, their coffee and cigarettes being finished, the pair rose. I then had a look at the man. He was clean-shaven, sallow, hard-lipped, and rather sinister-looking, but attractive in a smart dissipated sort of way ; the kind of person one would look at twice and fail to trust once. His companion, standing, was slim and exceedingly graceful. Her glance, wandering to my corner, found me, and I saw her whisper something to the man, who turned and favoured me with a quick look. Unconcernedly I returned the look. Obviously I was not interested in him or his companion. He turned to her with a slight shrug of the shoulders.

It is just possible that I might have followed them out into the lounge had I finished my luncheon, for the unexpected mention of a certain name had stimulated thought. But recollecting that I had determined not to interest myself in Mr. Jask or his activities, I methodically continued to dispose of the menu. Or apparently so, and was annoyed to find that I could not. Then I tried to think that the reference to the fellow may have meant nothing in particular. The papers were full of Indian affairs just then, and anyone following them closely might casually mention the name. Anyway, it was no business of mine. Yet I could not rid myself of the feeling that it was rather a remarkable coincidence. Against my wish things were shaping themselves most undesirably ; against my determination not to be interested I found

interest increasing. The woman and her companion intrigued me. Had the mentioning of Jask's name any significance? It would be odd if . . . But I would not entertain the idea.

And yet, at half-past four to the minute, being in the neighbourhood of Berkeley Square, I entered the May Fair Hotel and asked for Lady Clanwell. The man at the desk looked at me rather searchingly, I thought, and then said, "What name, sir?" I told him. "Lady Clanwell is expecting you, sir." He called to the page-boy, who escorted me to the lift and up to the third floor. Knocking on a door near the end of the passage he opened it and announced, "Colonel Gantian." I entered and the door was closed behind me.

Two women were seated at a table with the tea things spread before them. One was grey-haired, the other young. They both rose as I entered. The elder woman came towards me with outstretched hand.

"This is good of you, Colonel Gantian. Mr. Mayford said you would be sure not to disappoint us." (Did he, the dog!) "My daughter." She indicated the younger woman.

"So pleased to meet you, Colonel Gantian," said the daughter.

So this was Cynthia Clanwell, George's beauty. I saw a slim, fair, rather fragile-looking girl, who regarded me with a curious air of wonder. Instantly I thought that George had been talking, and speculated as to how far he had taken these ladies into his confidence respecting me. But on a closer inspection I came to the conclusion that this was the girl's habitual manner,

which was that of wide-eyed, wandering indifference, with now and again a curious flash of resolution. Pretty she was undoubtedly, with a marvellous pair of grey eyes shaded by long dark lashes. But she was frail, and her movements lacked the animation which should have been hers, probably due to residence in an enervating climate. So many Anglo-Indian women were like that, especially after the first flush of youth had passed. But this girl was still young, probably not more than one or two-and-twenty.

There was a tenseness in the air, or at least a suggestion of suppressed excitement, as we took tea. I could see that while they were striving to make conversation in the usual conventional manner, they were really studying me intently and wondering when they might broach the real object of my visit. And to tell the truth I felt something like an interloper. I had no business here, I had determined not to come, and yet here I was.

Lady Clanwell began by saying that Mr. Mayford had told her I had served in the Palestine campaign, and from that came the expected question: Had I met her son Derek out there? I confessed that I had not; there were so many of us, and we were spread over great distances.

"He died there," she said, her lip trembling. "He was a fine boy, Colonel Gantian. We had great hopes of him."

Many fine boys had gone the same way, and with them many great hopes. Poor mothers!

Cynthia Clanwell opened a box of cigarettes and laid them before me, taking one herself, which I

thought she smoked with a nonchalance that almost amounted to lassitude.

"Of course Mr. Mayford explained my position?" I began, seeing they wished me to begin. "You know I am no longer officially connected with his department?"

"Quite. He said you were an old friend of his, that you had frequently worked together, and that we might trust you as we would ourselves."

"At the same time you fully realize that I may be of no service?"

"I am sure you will be."

I did not even promise to try, for the image of Julia suddenly came between, frowning, threatening. I had already half-broken my word to her, and if I were not careful might break it entirely.

"Of course you know of the circumstances attending my husband's death?"

"A little."

She then recapitulated the meagre facts already known.

"Sir Everard was an advocate of strong measures?" I began.

"He thought it was the only way to obtain peace."

"Do you believe he was the victim of foul play?"

"I did not at first, but so many of his friends have suggested it that I am almost beginning to wonder."

"You entirely eliminate the possibility of accident?"

"Entirely."

"Officially he died of a heart attack?"

"I can't understand it. Of course he had a great

deal of political worry lately, and more than once his life had been threatened."

" Still, unknown to you, his heart may have been weak ? "

" I don't believe it ; he would have told me."

" Yet Doctor Lal assures us that it was," said Miss Clanwell.

" Doctor Lal ? "

Lady Clanwell took up the narrative. " Doctor Lal was on the Governor's staff. He is a great authority on malaria and other tropic diseases. In the last letter received from my husband he said that he was bringing him along."

" Then Doctor Lal was on board at the time ? "

" Yes."

" He is, of course, an Indian ? "

" And most loyal."

" And he has no doubt of the cause of Sir Everard's death ? "

" None whatever."

" Nor had the ship's doctor ? "

" No."

" You have said that Sir Everard had received many letters threatening his life ? "

" Many. His attitude towards the seditious had made him both hated and feared. They realized that he was a man with a commanding knowledge of the situation, one thoroughly conversant with the oriental mentality, and that given the opportunity he would not have compromised with rebellion. Unhappily there were others who did not see eye to eye with him."

It seemed to me that there was not much more

to be gained by question or answer, and that we were moving in a circle. If there were any mystery attending the Governor's death it was now buried deep in the Indian Ocean. Two qualified medical men had certified the cause of death, one being his personal physician, and there was no gainsaying the force of such evidence. Had Sir Everard disappeared overboard on a dark night one might have suspected the presence of an enemy. But here was a man who had died in his bed, who had not mysteriously disappeared, and whose body showed no marks of violence. The conclusion was therefore obvious, the medical testimony not to be impugned. On what grounds then could doubt be entertained? It was natural enough that both wife and daughter should hesitate between doubt and conviction, believing in him as they did, but it seemed rather unreasonable for others to make vague charges on mere suspicion.

I was reluctant to admit the almost insuperable difficulty of the situation, for I could see that these two women had a faith in me which I should be compelled to shatter. Heaven only knows how far Mayford had gone in bragging of my deductive powers. I understand he did talk of them to others, though to my face he uncompromisingly denounced me as a lucky blunderer. But the direct issue could not be evaded; it would be impossible for me to buoy up these good people with certain hopes which I knew would never be realized. As far as I could see the official version of Sir Everard's death was the correct one. There was no tithe of evidence to prove the contrary.

It was also evident that they expected an authori-

tative opinion, and it would have been easy enough to adopt an official pose and talk vaguely, but I could not do it. Instead, I began to ask various questions concerning those threats against Sir Everard's life, the precautions taken, and if he ever had a suspicion of any particular person from whom they emanated. Both shook their heads. He always treated threats of that sort with contempt. Though he knew the extremists would rejoice to hear of his death, he absolved the seditious leaders of all complicity in murder plots; not that murder in itself was abhorrent to them, but that the fear of discovery was great. It would have ended once and for all their pretence of constitutional methods, and any hope they might have entertained of achieving Dominion or any other status.

Incidentally, in discussing the leaders, their hopes and their aims, I mentioned the name of Leo Jask. Had they ever heard of him? It would seem that they had heard a good deal. He was known as a stirrer up of strife all through the East, a most dangerous enemy to society, whose Bolshevik propaganda had caused no end of trouble. He had done some desperate work in China, and had financed the rising against King Amanulla of Afghanistan. Then he moved among the tribes of the North-West Frontier, and was believed to have directed the late advance on Peshawar. A bitter enemy of England and all that she stood for. I asked what he was like in appearance, and the reply was that no one really seemed to know. He was apparently a man of many disguises. Some said he was a typical East Russian with the flat features of the Mongol, others that he

was a renegade Jew, others again that he was not a Russian at all but came from some country farther East.

"Once about six months ago, it was rumoured that he was in our Presidency, but though my husband made every endeavour to trace him he eluded our utmost vigilance."

"He is the sort of person who would not hesitate at murder?"

"If half they say of him is true he would hesitate at nothing."

"I suppose no one has the least idea where he is at present?"

"No one, though he is believed to be still in India."

"Sir Everard regarded him as really dangerous?"

"Extremely so."

As there was not a shred of evidence to connect him in any way with the Governor's death, it was clear that by no stretch of imagination could he be involved in that mystery. Indeed, to my own mind, there was no mystery at all, though, in the circumstances, I thought it better to reserve that opinion.

As I was about to leave these two anxious women, without being able to afford them even a tragic consolation, there came a low rap on the door, which being opened gave admittance to an Indian, who was at once introduced as Doctor Lal. He was a slim little man with jet-black hair parted in the middle. His eyes were large, intelligent, black, and almost supernaturally brilliant; the eyes of an enthusiast, a fanatic. Seizing Lady Clanwell's outstretched hand he bowed over it. Then turning to her daughter he also bowed. She smiled at him in a wan sort of way.

He next favoured me with a questioning look. Lady Clanwell, seeing that look and understanding it, explained the reason of my visit.

"Colonel Gantian was a friend of his Excellency?" he asked.

"No; as a matter of fact he comes from the police."

"Political," I added, with a reassuring smile.

"I understand. If I can be of any service to you, Colonel, please command me."

"Thank you very much."

Though his English was excellent he spoke it with that *chi-chi* accent peculiar to the Indian, and to many white folks born and bred out there.

Though on the point of departure, I momentarily hesitated to go, for the sudden arrival of Doctor Lal had added a new interest to my visit. Here was a man who could give me first-hand information, a fact which Lady Clanwell immediately recognized, for she said, "How very fortunate you should come at this moment, Doctor Lal. We were discussing with Colonel Gantian his Excellency's death. Perhaps you two would like to talk the matter over?"

"It would afford me the greatest pleasure to be of use to Colonel Gantian in his researches."

"Thanks," I said again.

I shook hands with Lady Clanwell and her daughter, who both expressed the hope that I would call again soon. Then I turned to Doctor Lal who, bowing, said he would accompany me to the lift. Evidently he was much at home in this environment.

Outside in the corridor we paused half-way to the lift, or rather he did, I of necessity doing the same. Then in a confidential, friendly manner he laid his

hand on my arm. I had noticed that his hands were small and thin, his wrists fragile like a woman's.

"You have been discussing the cause of his Excellency's death?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You have come to the conclusion that there is no mystery attached to it?"

"It seems to me there is no evidence to support such a contention."

"And there is none. Until well-meaning but ignorant friends began to whisper absurdities Lady Clancwell was without doubt, and had begun bravely to reconcile herself to her bereavement. Now she is full of wonder and indecision, which is almost a reflection on my skill and honour."

"I do not think she has any such thought. Indeed, she spoke most highly of your abilities and knowledge."

"I am an M.D. of London," he said, but without bravado.

"That ought to be good enough to go on with," I assured him.

"Have you ever been in India, Colonel Gantian?"

"Never."

"There are still many prejudices," he said.

"So I understand. But your diagnosis was confirmed by the ship's doctor. That is a point not easily ignored."

"Yet the knowledge that there should be even the shadow of a doubt pains me."

"Has anyone given that doubt a name?"

"A very ugly one," he answered.

"Poison?"

"Yes."

" You do not believe it ? "

" Not for a moment ; it would be impossible."

" I understand that when his Excellency left Bombay he was in much better health than he had been for a long time."

" So he insisted that it should be officially notified, but as a matter of fact he was already a doomed man."

" And you are quite convinced that there could have been no enemy on board the ship who, in some secret manner, might have approached him ? "

" It would have been impossible."

" Then if there is a secret, Doctor, the Indian Ocean holds it ? "

Carefully he looked up and down the corridor before answering. Then in a lowered voice he said : " There is a secret, Colonel Gantian, a very painful one, which I think I ought to confide to you, but which I would not let those dear ladies know for the world. *His Excellency was a secret drug addict.*"

CHAPTER III

WHO IS MRS. ASTERLEY?

IF Doctor Lal had spoken the truth concerning Sir Everard Clanwell, then the sooner the whole affair was hushed up the better. Doubtless one or two particulars were worthy of deeper investigation, but if the only result of such investigation should end in the ruin of a great reputation the obvious thing to do, or so it seemed to me, was to let the matter drop. Probably there was a selfish sense of relief in this, as it would absolve me from further participation and act as a salve to conscience.

After dinner at the club that night I once more encountered Hughie Tabran, the young fellow who had been on the point of taking me into his confidence when the inevitable Woodward appeared. Buttonholing me he led the way to a recess of the smoking-room, ordered coffee, liqueurs and cigars, which, duly arriving, he turned to me a rather wistful countenance. He was a good-looking youngster with plenty of money and nothing to do, and though I cannot say that we were really intimate we had always been good friends. Indeed, I had more than once lightly admonished him as to his manner of living, which I must admit he had taken in good part, looking on me as one of those steady, sober-sided old sticks who

never did foolish things, which proves how little he really knew me.

But he was now regarding me very seriously. His face was flushed, his hands restless, his lips twitching. Knowing him and his weaknesses I wondered if he had been indulging too freely. Though I had never known him to get drunk, I had seen him so near drunkenness as to make him talkative and restless. In such moods he was easy game for certain fellows who frequented the card-room, and who it was whispered were not averse to a little sharp practice should the opportunity come along.

"So glad you turned up to-night," he began, "and, thank Heaven, the heavy Woodward's not about. You remember his barging in at lunch-time? That fellow's giving the club a bad name. He ought to be reported to the committee." I smiled, appreciating the intrusive Woodward as little as he.

"Now look here, Gantian," he continued earnestly. "I know I play the fool a bit at times, and possibly you think I'm an awful rotter; but I'm really like many other chaps who only need an incentive to get them out of the ruck."

"Fire away, my dear fellow. My business in life is to supply incentives to deserving youth."

Ignoring my attempt at facetiousness, he continued earnestly: "We all know who you are, and what is still more important, what you've done."

"The deuce you do!"

"You know what I mean. A chap can't do rather remarkable things in this world without its being talked about."

"And all this flattery is apropos of?"

"The late Governor of Bombay, Sir Everard Clanwell. You have heard of him?"

"Yes."

"How he died?"

"Yes."

"He has a wife and daughter."

"I took tea with them this afternoon."

His eyes widened. "That's odd. I had no idea you were acquainted."

"We met for the first time to-day."

"At the May Fair?" I nodded. He regarded me still more intently and then lowered his voice. "Was Doctor Lal there?"

"He came in just before I left."

"What did you think of him?"

"He seemed an inoffensive sort of person."

"But a nigger, Gantian! Fancy a nigger attending to Cynthia! Don't you think it's horrible?"

"I understand he is a very able man, and 'nigger' is scarcely a generous term."

"Well, what else is he?"

"Prejudice, my dear Tabbie. Is that all you've got against him?"

"No, it isn't. He knows Mrs. Asterley."

"And why shouldn't he?"

"It's like this," he continued rapidly. "Cynthia Clanwell and I have known each other for ever so long—long, indeed, before Sir Everard went out to Bombay as governor. She—well, we weren't exactly engaged, but I'm really awfully fond of her. She and her mother came home some time before Sir Everard left on his last trip, and I don't mind telling you I saw a good deal of them. Then came the

tragedy, and later the arrival of Doctor Lal. Ever since then things haven't gone smoothly, and I can't help thinking this Indian is the disturbing influence."

" You said something about his attendance on Miss Clanwell."

" You see, Lady Clanwell thinks no end of him."

" I understand he was also appreciated by Sir Everard."

" I know," he admitted surlily, " and when Cynthia had a slight attack of malaria he happened to be on the spot. They say he's an authority on the subject."

" Then could she be in better hands ? "

" She had nothing really the matter with her before he came."

" Does that suggest more than a latent development ? "

" I dunno ; but this I do know, I never heard her complain of so much as a headache until lately."

So this accounted for that air of lassitude which I had noticed in Cynthia Clanwell, and which had struck me as a congenital sort of boredom. Once only had she shown a sign of animation, to subside almost immediately into her accustomed air of physical or mental lethargy. But now there appeared to be something more in her apparent indifference, or so I was led to suspect from Tabran's method of imparting information and his decided antipathy to the Indian doctor.

" I suppose you're not suggesting that Doctor Lal is the villain of the piece ? " I asked.

" I only know that apart from any physical ailment from which Cynthia may be suffering her whole manner towards me has changed entirely."

"But you know of no reason why it should?"

"Except that Lal knows Anna Asterley."

"Which I don't."

Again he began to fidget, pulling furiously at his cigar one moment and as furiously biting on it the next. It was quite clear that he wished to make a further confession, yet wondered if he dared. In spite of myself I was beginning to get a little interested, and smiled encouragingly.

"Why should I bore you?" he asked.

"I don't know."

He hesitated. "It's rather a delicate matter."

"Remember, I'm not asking for your confidence."

"I know, and you must think me an awful ass, and I've no right to impose on your good nature."

"But you thought I might be of use?"

"Believe me, it's not quite like that." And then suddenly: "Look here, old chap, you may as well know the truth. I've been mixed up with Mrs. Asterley, and I'm afraid that Indian blighter has been telling tales. If I knew for certain I'd twist his infernal neck."

"I see. And it's not possible to explain the situation to Miss Clanwell?"

"How can I! What would she think of me?"

Remembering Julia, and as a consequence feeling extremely virtuous, I might have delivered a most edifying homily on the way of the transgressor. However, I refrained, never having been particularly partial to good advice myself. But a little further explanation seemed necessary, and I wondered when he was going to produce it. He had not taken me aside merely to burden me with his incoherences.

"And you've never heard of Mrs. Asterley?" he ventured.

"Never."

"I wonder if Mayford has?"

So that was it! Through me the interest of George! It was not very clever of him. He must have seen something in my face to arouse suspicion, for he continued rather hurriedly: "Don't misunderstand me, Gantian; this is not an affair of the police, or secret service, or anything of that sort. I admit, it looks an imposition on friendship, but I'm really worried, and you're the only man I feel I can trust."

Naturally I was flattered, but as our friendship was not of the closest I could not clearly see why he should have signalled me out for such an honour. The reason, however, was immediately hinted at.

"I think love is not her only interest in life."

"But plays a conspicuous part?" I suggested.

"She's a very attractive woman."

"Naturally."

"And more than a bit mysterious," he added.

"Don't you think mystery adds charm to the sex?"

"That's not the sort of mystery I mean."

"Exactly what sort do you mean?"

"I wish you could meet her," he answered.

"I don't think I'm particularly anxious. No, my dear Tabbie, you must excuse me the honour, and realize that I have put aside all the vanities and temptations of this world."

He was about to begin again in his most serious vein when, much to my relief, who should invade our privacy but George Mayford. He came towards

us, a broad and affable smile on his broad and affable face.

"The very man I've been looking for," was his greeting. I scowled. His smile broadened. Then he greeted Tabbie, but with no particular enthusiasm. His opinion of that young man was not a very exalted one. To him Hughie Tabran was one of those foolish young-fellows-about-town who have an undue appreciation of their self-importance. But I who had been seeing deeper into the young man was a little resentful of George's attitude towards him, which to say the least of it was exceedingly brusque. Tabran, realizing this, rose from his seat and looked inquiringly at me.

"See you later," I said.

"Thanks."

He nodded curtly at Mayford and wandered off. George dropped into the vacant chair, and as he watched the retreating figure of Tabran grunted, "Young fool!"

"Don't you like fools, George?"

"Only one, and he's a thorn in the flesh."

"Hasty fellow. You're going to be wildly interested in that young man."

"That's news."

"I'm always bringing you news. He knows the Clanwells."

"O—oh!"

"And Doctor Lal, and hates him."

"Why?"

"Because he is physician-in-ordinary to Cynthia Clanwell, and he doesn't like the idea of a black man . . . You get me?"

" And because of that you think I'm going to be interested in him ? "

" Because of that, and other things. George, who is Mrs. Asterley ? "

" Mrs. Asterley," he repeated, then slowly shook his head. " I don't know. Who is she ? "

" A friend of Tabbie's, and Doctor Lal is a friend of hers."

" What do you think you're trying to tell me ? "

" I have told you."

" That that young fool's in love with Cynthia Clanwell ? "

" And he knows Anna Asterley."

" Who the devil is Anna Asterley anyway ? "

" I wonder."

" Why not get him to introduce you ? "

" I have thought of it."

" You think she might interest us ? "

" Our interests are not identical, George."

" They're going to be."

" Always an optimist."

" How can I help being, with you as my inspiration ? I take it you kept the appointment I made for you with Lady Clanwell ? "

" Having nothing better to do. Charming ladies, George, and Doctor Lal seems quite a nice little fellow, though I didn't like his lips. They're blue-black."

" He was with Sir Everard when he died."

I smiled. Threateningly he raised a huge red fist. " You know, I shall sock you presently."

" My dear George, another of your colossal mare's-nests. That's the worst of you policemen ; you're always suspecting shadows."

"Then I am to assume that the ladies Clanwell are not likely to be of much service?"

"Just that and nothing more."

"Nor Doctor Lal?"

"His professional dignity has been hurt."

George sat back and glared at me from under pent brows. That he was disappointed in me was obvious, though what he had expected from my visit to the May Fair I really don't know. And I took a curious satisfaction in his disappointment, a sort of impish delight in the knowledge that he had been thwarted in bringing me into his schemes, and that his fantastic edifice of a political conspiracy was dissipating itself in air.

"What we have to do," he said, "is to trace the connection between Sir Everard's death and Leo Jask."

"So you're still haunted by that bogey?"

"He's something more than a bogey. Already he is suspected of being responsible for more than half a dozen political assassinations, and of all officials who had the reputation of being strong and resolute men. Jask doesn't hit the lowly; his business is to strike terror among the exalted. Now you see why we are so anxious to lay him by the heels."

"The exalted are getting nervous?"

"They don't know who's to be the next. The worst of it is the fellow seems to come and go like the wind. Even when he was known to be in India no trace of him, apart from the trail of his misdeeds, could be found, though the government never relaxed their efforts to get hold of him. You see, the fellow's in a position to buy allegiance, or so it's said, which

is probably true. Anyway, that's the position ; and unless somebody blunders . . ."

"Having blundered into happiness, George, you may take it from me that I'm not blundering out of it again."

"I hope not. It would be a thousand pities." He sprang out of the chair. "Well, I must be moving. Let me know if anything interesting should *blunder* along."

He grinned and so did I. The joke is that both of us felt sure of ourselves ; he that he had got me, I just as sure that he hadn't.

Saying good-bye to him in the hall I turned and once more encountered Tabbie. Apparently he had been lying in wait. Hesitatingly he advanced.

"Seen the new show at the Palace ?" he began tentatively. I admitted that I had not. "I hear it's not half bad. If you've nothing better to do we might drop in for an hour. I've got a couple of seats."

As I had nothing better to do we dropped in for an hour, and afterwards he suggested a visit to a well-known night club in Bond Street, which I also accepted. Anything to kill the time till Julia returned. Not being a frequenter of such places I knew none of its many patrons, but Hughie, who was apparently much at home, nodded here and there to several men and women. We were escorted to a table by a dignified individual whom the boy treated with profound respect, introducing me with great solemnity. A band was playing and the floor was crowded with dancers, so that we practically passed to our table unobserved. Food was ordered. I must say the boy deferred to me in the most charming manner. I might have been

an uncle from the country, if not exactly a countrified uncle, from whom he had expectations.

More and still more people arrived until the place was packed, and presently I felt my companion nudge me as he whispered, "There she is."

"Who?"

"Mrs. A. That woman in the shimmering green. Over there at that table by the pillar."

Looking, I saw the table and the woman in the shimmering green, but as she was sitting in profile I could see little more than a well-shaped chin and burnished hair. The man with her was a nondescript sort of person, middle-aged and inclined to stoutness.

"Surprised?" I asked.

"No, I thought she'd be here; that's why I really asked you to come. I want you to meet her."

"By what I can see of her she looks dangerous."

"She is, but not to you."

"What makes you think I'm immune?"

"Instinct."

And then the woman looked our way, and seeing Hughie waved her hand and smiled. I started. Where had I seen that face before? But she had turned to her companion and was speaking rapidly. I saw him swing round and look in our direction. She tossed her head, turned our way once more, and came towards us. We both rose as she approached. And now I knew where I had seen her. Those plucked eyebrows! She was the woman of the restaurant who had spoken the word "Jask"!

"My dear Tabbie," she smiled, "this is an unexpected pleasure. I thought you had migrated to a better land."

"How de do," he responded with perhaps unnecessary stiffness. Then swift upon it came the introduction. She smiled. Her mouth was ever so pretty when she smiled. Next she looked at me in a curious, quizzing sort of way. Was she remembering? But I soon saw that I was flattering myself. The curiosity passed from her eyes, and when she opened them again on mine I saw they were of an unusual grey-blue, which in the artificial light appeared to be tipped with brown.

She motioned for a waiter to bring a chair and picked up Tabbie's cigarette-case which was lying on the table. As I offered her a light her eyes once more met mine. They were appraising, coldly penetrating.

"You do not often come here, Colonel Gantian? At least I don't remember ever seeing you before. Tabbie, why have you never mentioned Colonel Gantian? I never knew you had such a friend."

"Then there was something you didn't know."

"One of the many," she sighed.

Tabbie sat glumly morose while she and I talked. She seemed entirely to have forgotten her stout cavalier. Commonplaces passed between us, pointless remarks that came and went, but punctuated by stabs of penetrating grey-blue eyes. Outwardly one of the many, a fluttering butterfly in a vivid setting; but inwardly perhaps something more. I knew that she was trying to sum me up, and rather enjoyed the ordeal. One after the other she seemed to analyse my unprepossessing features. Once such a scrutiny from a pretty woman might have produced a certain embarrassment, but now I was indifferent to her opinion,

or to that of any other woman, always with the exception of one.

As the band commenced again and the dancers took the floor she smiled and put the question, "Shall we paddle?"

"My paddling days are over," I said.

But she had risen and held out her hand. It was a command. I nodded towards Tabbie, who still sat glaring stolidly at nothing. She pulled a face. It was then that I particularly noticed the fullness of her lips.

She had not inaptly described the movement on the crowded floor. We paddled, she charmingly. Occasionally her grey-blue eyes, brown-tipped, flashed up into mine and she smiled. Her lissom figure yielded to my slightest pressure. Her hair was very pretty and shone brightly. The colour was real; her skin was wonderfully white and flawless. A delightful perfume seemed to float up from her.

"Quite a decent paddle," she said when the band stopped. "Did you enjoy it, Colonel Gantian?"

"Very much. But see, your friend is looking this way."

"I'd forgotten him," she admitted. "May I bring him over? Why not make up a party?"

Without waiting to receive permission she left me and sailed across the floor. Tabbie looked up, perhaps a little resentfully.

"She's coming back," I explained; "just slipped across to get her friend."

"What do you think of her?" he asked.

"Charming."

"You seemed to get along all right."

"She uses a most delicious perfume."

"I know." His reply was without enthusiasm, but he looked a warning which I pretended not to see. As though I needed it!

She came across to us, her cavalier trailing behind. He was introduced as Count Solini, and proved a heavy slumberous sort of fellow with full sensual lips. He was clean-shaven save for a tightly clipped dark moustache. His hair was streaked with grey and grew in a curious point on his forehead, which also receded in a flat curious way suggesting that what should have been frontal development had migrated to the back. His ears were the most singular I had ever seen, pulpy, yet narrow and long, with tufts of black hair sprouting out of them. Yet an agreeable enough fellow in his steady stolid way, who spoke English fluently with an accent I could not place, though I assumed from his name that it was Italian.

Mrs. Asterley took charge of the occasion and saw that it did not flag. In vain I looked for some sign of intimacy between her and Tabbie, who still sat glum and appeared to be rather ashamed of himself. But if she noticed his humour she betrayed no sign of it. Whatever he had been to her he certainly was nothing now, or so it would seem from the indifference of her manner. As to the Count, he was easy amiability itself, smiled generously all around him, and paid the strictest attention to his glass. Though he was not what could be called a chatty person he was not slow to supply his quota to the conversation. The exact relationship between him and the lively Mrs. Asterley I could not divine, but to all appearances they were just friends. She treated

us all with an equal indifference, and seemed perfectly satisfied with her domination of our table. And when the dancers once more took the floor she invited me to another "paddle." I looked from her to the others, but she pouted and shook her head. The Count smiled benignly over the rim of his glass; Hughie Tabran was plainly indifferent. A most surly young man who made no attempt to hide his surliness.* The Count smiled a blessing on us as we rose. But no sooner had we gone than he (so Hughie informed me afterwards) woke up and began to ask questions. He was afraid he had not caught my name. Gantian—Colonel Gantian. Army! Retired he was told. But fortunately the boy was in no mood to volunteer information. He had no liking for the Count, whose extraordinary ears offended him.

Meanwhile Mrs. Asterley and I elbowed our way through the crowd on the floor. Occasionally she flashed a curious, intimate look at me, but on the whole was decidedly more reserved than on the occasion of our first dance. Whether this was to be attributed to my former lack of responsiveness I do not know, but whatever it was the restraint in her was obvious. She seemed relieved when the band stopped. I know I was.

But the night was not yet over, though I think we were all feeling a bit bored. Returning to our table, she invited the three of us round to her flat for a final whisky and soda. Now, while I had no desire for further indulgence, I had been asking myself all the evening what this woman really knew of the mysterious Jask; for though I had no intention of seriously involving myself in the affair, I might pick

up some information that would be of service to George. Accordingly I accepted the invitation, as did the Count. Tabbie wasn't asked, but followed sulkily in our wake. Once or twice he tried to catch my eye and wireless a warning, and probably was much amazed at my obtuseness.

A very handsome car received us at the door, the Count's, probably, and we were whirled to a large block of flats in Knightsbridge. Mounting by the lift to the fourth floor we were shown into a room which at first suggested bareness, and was rather dimly lighted; but when one grew accustomed to the environment the bareness vanished and one became conscious of a rich carpet, of comfortable chairs, and a luxurious sofa over which was scattered an almost superfluity of soft silken cushions. The Count, apparently no stranger to the room, at once sank into a corner of the sofa and pressed a heap of cushions against his back and under his arms; almost buried himself in cushions and grunted appreciatively. Tabbie and I decorously occupied a couple of chairs.

"Make yourselves at home," she commanded cheerily, "and please smoke."

We obeyed, though it seemed to me that I had done nothing but smoke for hours. The Count offered me his cigar-case, but I couldn't tackle another cigar if I wished to retain my senses. He, however, lit a prodigious fellow. The man must have had a head, or a stomach; perhaps both.

Our hostess swayed across to a dainty lacquered cupboard which stood to the right of the fireplace, threw open the doors and displayed an array of decanters and glittering glass. "Sure you prefer whisky

and soda ? " she asked. We assured her that we did. " Then make yourself useful, Tabbie," she said. " Excuse me a moment." As she disappeared, Hughie, none too amiably, I thought, rose, crossed over to the cupboard, and poured out the refreshment. I noticed that the glass he handed to the Count was half-full of whisky. But this made no difference to that worthy. He swallowed it as though it had been water, and on the top of it grew extremely affable ; indeed was preparing to tell us the latest " good thing " in the way of stories when our hostess reappeared.

" That's right," she said, beaming on us. " I hope the whisky's good ? " We murmured approval, the Count in particular growing almost lyrical. I caught her eye. She was smiling. But never once did she look at Tabbie, or address him directly, which struck me as being rather strange if what he had said was true. Nor did she appear to be angry with him. Her attitude was just one of cool indifference ; she might have been meeting him almost for the first time. Evidently there were no heart-burnings over the break.

When at last I tentatively suggested going she did not ask us to stay, though I thought I saw the ghost of a smile flicker across her face as she perceived Tabbie's uprising. The Count laboriously dragged himself from among the cushions, and apparently out of a nap. However, once on his feet he was wide awake and affable, and offered to run us home, an offer politely declined, I wishing to stretch my legs and imbibe a little fresh air.

Mrs. Asterley saw us to the door. She made a

most alluring picture as she stood smiling and chatting under the hall lamp.

"Now you have found your way here, Colonel Gantian," she said, and paused. To which I could find no other reply than, "Thank you ever so much."

"Then don't forget," she added in a voice that was meant only for me.

Outside, Hughie pushed his arm through mine as we walked along and began: "I'm frightfully sorry, old chap, I really am."

"What for?"

"Letting you in for this sort of thing."

"I've enjoyed the outing immensely. Who's Count Solini?"

"I don't know. Shocking bounder!"

"Italian?"

"Dago of some sort," he replied contemptuously. Decidedly he was not in the best of moods, and not inclined to be communicative. Pettish, I thought, possibly jealous; dog-in-the-manger mood; anything but reasonable. However, he insisted upon accompanying me all the way to Cork Street, being apparently under the impression that as he had brought me out it was necessary that he should see me home.

So that was Tabbie's Mrs. Asterley! Pretty obvious, was my first thought, though my second was not without a lack of assurance. That she might be a friend or acquaintance of Doctor Lal was no great thing. A man of his professional eminence would probably have a wide circle of acquaintances. In this disease-ridden world one never knew when such a friend might be of service. The more serious matter was, did she know Jask personally or only by repute?

It is just possible that in accepting her invitation to the flat I might have had an ulterior motive, a vague sort of hope that mention of him might have been made. In this, however, I was disappointed. Yet the fact remained that she was a decidedly intriguing person, though to what extent her intrigues had carried, or would carry her, I could not dimly conjecture.

CHAPTER IV

FOUR IN SOHO

IN the morning a letter arrived from Julia. It told the same story of slow movement and incredible unhaste of her attorneys, perhaps not all their fault. Other members of the family were erecting barriers. She had hoped to leave New York by the end of the week, but now she couldn't fix a day for sailing. But she was coming to me as soon as she could, and then . . . After all, she had made a mistake in not letting me go with her. She would have loved for me to meet some of her friends. She admitted that not a few of them were a little surprised to find that her fiancé was not an English duke, or at least a foreign prince, but they would have understood had they met me; which remark, or so I thought, was exceedingly sweet of her.

Perhaps I ought to explain that the disappointment of her friends was due to the fact that Julia's share of the Wallington dollars was considerable enough to make her extraordinarily desirable in the most exalted markets of Europe. Not that the dollars mattered much to me; I had enough of my own modestly to support any woman. She just happened to be the sister of my dearest friend, who happened to be the owner of certain valuable lots in New York City.

Many a time he had spoken of her when we were together in the Near East (as I had spoken of my little sister Edna, who was living at our old place in Sussex with two or three faithful servants), but I don't think I ever expected to see her, and I certainly never expected that she and I . . . And then one day she came to England with her brother, "to look after him," as she laughingly told me, and he most surely needed a good deal of looking after. And then . . . Well, I never for a moment thought that she would look at me. I think I was well enough once you got to know me. Most men and I hit it off without friction. But I was distinctly not a ladies' man ; by no stretch of the imagination could I have been called good-looking. Handsome was never thought of in my case ; women never saw me when other fellows were about. I was a sort of male Cinderella neglected even by the fairy Godmother. Of course Edna loved me, and in her adorable ignorance thought me rather wonderful. But it's the love of the other fellow's sister that makes a man sit up and take stock of himself.

All these thoughts and more, a thousand more, kept running through my mind as I read Julia's letter. Though I know now that I had fallen for her at first sight, I never for a moment believed that she would ever see in me more than her brother's friend. Consequently I stood off, expecting every day to hear of her engagement to some worthy or worthless member of the peerage. I frankly admit now that I was quite blind ; I ought to have understood certain charming graces. But somehow I thought I had sunk for ever in a certain rut, and if not quite content to remain there had no great desire or incentive to get out.

Probably there was some perverse vanity in this attitude. If women didn't want me I could assure myself that I didn't want them. And all the time I was wanting one of them as I had never wanted anything in my life.

Probably the thought of the dollars also created a formidable obstacle. I knew that many a hungry prince and peer had looked her way. There were a few decaying or encumbered estates which would gladly have welcomed her as mistress. How then could I let myself dream, I, an ordinary fellow with nothing at the back of me and no prospect of ever being better than I was? I have already said I had no looks to recommend me. I hated to see myself in a mirror, and as a consequence frequently found shaving an ordeal I would have shirked if I could. That twist in my mouth which gave it such a hard look, and which had earned me a detestable nickname, was a perpetual menace to hope. No woman . . . Or so I told myself till I got to believe it. And all the time, as she afterwards confessed, she was waiting for me to speak and wondering if I really cared.

Though conscious of guilt I could not help smiling as I read her final admonition to beware of George Mayford. She wrote :

" He's a dear, of course, and I'm very fond of him, but on no account let him lead you into temptation. That last business was quite enough for me. Think of it, darling ; death escaped by a miracle. What should I have done if . . . Once and for all let him know that you have definitely retired from business. If he has any more scoundrels in the offing let his own policemen run them to earth. You know I don't

all alike, all want a nurse. Look at John! You can't imagine the trouble that boy has caused me. And you're no better. But you've got to be respectable now—and *don't forget it!* No more wild goose chases, and no more of George Mayford. He's an insidious, ginger-haired, red-faced villain, and I positively forbid you to have anything more to do with him. *Get that!*"

And here was I already partly involved, and might easily be more deeply so if I were not careful. Still, there was consolation in the knowledge that the matter hadn't gone far, and it was up to me to check its further progress, which I had no doubt could easily be done. I was merely amusing myself with no other intention than that of passing a few deadly dull hours. I couldn't leave town because any moment might bring a cable or a telephone call from her; I couldn't even run down for the day to see Edna, who probably was sailing the Syrian Sea or the Sea of Marnora, or inhaling the dust of Palestine. On the other hand, it is just possible that the situation offered an interest which I found difficult to resist.

While shaving I again questioned Albert with reference to his visit to Sevenoaks, and learned that he found his mother "in the pink." She was really a wonderful old lady, he assured me, tough as leather and as bright as a newly polished tunic button. But with regard to that other matter (that "other matter" being his girl Flo), he was not quite so enthusiastic. She, it would seem, was still inclined to indulge in her sergeant-major tactics, at the thought of which he shook a dubious head. She acted, so he said, as though she were on the parade-ground. While admiring

character he was not sure that he liked too much of it in a woman. On the whole he thought he would wait a bit before committing himself. No hurry, sir; does a woman good to keep her guessing. He didn't think his house, if he ever had one, would be big enough to hold two sergeant-majors, and as he intended to be one he failed to see where the other was coming in. -

Shortly after ten o'clock George Mayford rang up. I knew he would. After our usual facetious greetings he asked if there was any news. Yes, I said, plenty.

"Good! Well?"

"I've just had a letter from Julia."

"Oh!"

"I am forbidden to have any further truck with you."

"You would be. Bless her! Give her my love, and tell her I'm still your guardian angel. Did you manage to shake off young Tabran last night?"

"Ha, ha!"

"Now what does that mean?"

"Mrs. Asterley is a very charming woman."

"How do you know?"

"I danced with her last night."

"Julia shall never know. Well?"

"Ever met Count Solini?"

"Never."

"I believe he's at the Ritz."

"What else do you believe?"

"That it's time you retired."

"I wonder if you realize how greatly you annoy me?"

"Splendid!"

"What is?"

"The knowledge that I'm through with you."

"Come round and have a chat."

"Not on your life."

"I've heard a bit more about Jask. But of course you're not interested?"

"Not in the least."

Albert looked inquiringly at me as I turned from the telephone. I could almost imagine that the old warhorse sniffed the smoke of battle.

"It's a quiet life for us, Albert," I said.

"Yes, sir."

There was a twinkle in his eye which I pretended not to see. He knew quite well that Mr. Mayford on the 'phone at that time of the day meant something out of the ordinary, but having been schooled to patience he could bide his time. I am not sure that he didn't know me almost as well, if not better, than I knew myself. A sly fellow, and deep-thinking, though never presumptuous or inclined to express an opinion without being asked for it. He was the one item belonging to me that my friend Wallington regarded with envy, and one of the few things in this world his dollars could not purchase. "He's a great guy," he used to say, "and I'll sure get him one of these days," though he knew well enough that day would never come while I continued to crawl above the earth.

Of a set purpose I avoided lunching at the club that afternoon, thinking I might run into George or Tabbie, and having no wish to meet either. Though sorely tempted to drop into the May Fair and pay my respects to the widow and her daughter, I thought it better to

deny myself that pleasure. They might have attached an importance to me that I by no means deserved. I should never really know how rhapsodic George had grown, and I had no wish to disappoint them or involve myself unduly. They might possibly have entertained hopes which I saw no chance of fulfilment.

So I lunched at a quiet place in Soho called the Café Rivoli, choosing a table at the end of the room which permitted me to view those who came and went. As it was near the service end I ate to the accompaniment of a great clattering of plates and the ringing of knives and forks, the bustling and the shouting of waiters. But these matters were of little consequence, especially as the proprietor, a stodgy person in a quaint frock-coat, produced a pint of claret which he most highly recommended, and which I found worthy of all the good things he had said in its favour. The soup I passed, not being over-partial to soups of doubtful origin; but the tartare sauce made the fish palatable, and the cutlets and green peas were done to a turn. The sweet, if I remember, was a nondescript sort of affair, but the coffee (special) was admirable, likewise the old brandy, again most highly recommended.

It was while I was sampling the latter that two men entered the restaurant, men of importance, I gathered, from the manner in which they were received by the proprietor. He approached them bowing and rubbing his hands one over the other in the best professional style, and was received by the elder of the two, a stoutish person whom I immediately recognized as Count Solini, with a genial wave of the hand. This was rather interesting. As the Count swept the restaurant with a swift glance my napkin went up to my

mouth. After the few words of greeting were over the proprietor preceded them up a narrow staircase which evidently led to the private rooms above. The Count's companion brought up the rear of the cavalcade, and it was then, my napkin still to my mouth, that I got the first clear look at him. I have a pretty good memory for faces, and I suddenly felt that I had seen this man before. But where? That sallow, sinister face, that hard mouth, that jet-black hair! It annoyed me to think I could not remember. And then like a flash it came. He was the man I had seen lunching with Mrs. Asterley when the name of Jask had floated my way.

At first thought this appeared still more interesting, though when one came to think it out the interest somewhat evaporated. What more natural than that the two men should be acquainted, and that they should visit a restaurant where they were so honourably received? However, as if expecting a further development, and to excuse my stay, I beckoned to the waiter and ordered another brandy, carefully keeping my eye on the door. I had the feeling that something more might happen, due to two causes: first, the reception of the Count and his friend; secondly, the manner in which the proprietor hovered near the entrance, and the way he swung round to observe each new patron as he entered.

Nor was I disappointed. Some five minutes after the arrival of the Count no less a person than Doctor Lal appeared, to be greeted by the proprietor with another elaborate bow. Undoubtedly the Indian had been expected. He nodded curtly, glanced along the room, and swiftly mounted the stairs.

No use attempting to deny that I was now more than a little interested, though I still tried to assure myself that there was nothing extraordinary in the procedure. After all, what was there suspicious in three friends meeting at a certain place at a given time? Doctor Lal being known to Mrs. Asterley would most likely know her friends. Had it not been for the manner of the proprietor I might have fancied I was imagining a vain thing. But from watching him carefully, his lingering near the entrance and his furtive glances towards the door, I felt sure he was expecting an addition to the party, and I found myself guessing at the identity of the unknown.

I think I watched that door even more eagerly than he did, my napkin ready as a mask. Nor had I long to wait. Presently it swung open and Mrs. Asterley appeared. She smiled and nodded to the proprietor, who, bowing, escorted her to the stairs, up which she instantly disappeared.

And still I was determined to prove to myself that all this meant nothing more than a friendly little luncheon-party, but could not get rid of the idea that it might not be as innocent as it appeared. Lal and Mrs. Asterley I knew something of, but who were Solini and his sallow-faced friend? And how account for the manner of the proprietor, his evident anxiety and expectation? Which of the four was the most distinguished patron, and why was he so distinguished?

I lingered but a little while longer, having no wish suddenly to encounter any of the party. Nor did I cross the road when I passed out into the street. There are such things as windows, and some people have a reprehensible habit of looking out of them.

Arriving at my rooms in Cork Street about an hour later, intending to devote myself to Julia, I was confronted by Albert, who informed me that Mr. Mayford had rung up shortly after twelve. Under my breath I consigned Mr. Mayford to the most unpleasant place I knew by repute, but asked if he had left a message.

"I was to tell you, sir, in case you couldn't get him on the 'phone, that he wants you to dine with him at the club to-night."

"Anything else?"

"He said I was to tell you that he was bringing a gentleman with him whom he wishes you particularly to meet."

"I suppose I'll have to go, Albert?"

"I suppose so, sir. Mr. Mayford generally has something up his sleeve."

"That's what I'm afraid of, and we want nothing to come along that is likely to cause us inconvenience."

"Indeed no, sir."

"He knows we've cut him out."

"Yes, sir."

"And when Miss Julia comes we'll wipe him clean off the slate."

"Yes, sir. Are you expecting Miss Julia soon?"

"I wish I knew. We oughtn't to have let her go."

"No, sir; but then we never dreamt that she would be away so long, and that this waiting would turn out to be so—so—" he hesitated for a moment and then added—"tiresome. And it isn't as though Mr. Wally or Miss Edna was here. Seems to me, sir, as though our little party was all broke up."

"Not a bit of it, Albert; just settling down to the quiet life. Our racketing days are over."

A half-sigh escaped him. "Looks like it ; though I think a little excitement now and again does a man a bit of good."

"You'll get all the excitement you want when you marry."

"There's the excitement that you fancy," he replied, "and the excitement that you don't."

I knew what he wanted—adventure, the rough and tumble of life, the clash of men in anger, or the pitting of wit against wit. Those great hands of his were made for other than domestic service, and much other service had they known, and I knew that there was always the hope with him that they would know more. He was never so happy as when exchanging blows. Then that lean leathery jaw of his would stick out in a most fearsome manner, his eyes flash, and he would dance on his toes like a kitten with never a word from that tight-lipped mouth no matter how close the press. A fine fellow to have beside you in a tight corner, as I had proved more than once. And now he brushed and laid out my clothes, and made tea ! And beyond was the dreaded sergeant-major waiting to devour him !

Without more ado I sat down and wrote my daily letter to Julia, but between the lines I saw many things that had no right to be there ; among them the unctuous proprietor of the *Café Rivoli*, Count Solini and the charming Mrs. Asterley, who looked particularly smart in a neat black hat. There were also other visions : Indian temples, drug addicts, seething white-clad crowds, and through all the face of George Mayford bursting with redness, who would stare at me from under his jutting brows. So he wanted me to dine

with him that night ; a man coming with him whom he "particularly wished me to meet," a message that made me more than a little suspicious, and by no means inclined to accept his invitation.

Finishing the letter, I was about to send Albert to post it (he being the only person other than myself I would have trusted with such a commission) when the telephone began to buzz. As I sat looking at it he entered.

"If it's Mr. Mayford, sir?"

"May as well hear what he has to say."

It was Mr. Mayford, who began by upbraiding me for not ringing him up.

"You simply must come along," he said. "General Winslake is most anxious to meet you."

"That's very nice of him." I hadn't the remotest idea who General Winslake was.

"Old Indian officer ; knows the Clanwells. He's going to interest you. Don't forget ; eight o'clock."

"Just a minute."

"Not a second, darling. Frightfully busy ; country calling."

He rang off. Looking round at Albert I saw the ghost of a smile playing round the corners of his grim mouth.

"They won't leave us alone, Albert."

"No, sir."

General Winslake proved to be a fine soldierly looking man with a white moustache and thin white hair meticulously parted in the centre. How much information concerning me George had volunteered I do not know, but that he had not been over-reticent I guessed from the close scrutiny with which the General

regarded me. He had small sharp blue eyes half-buried in innumerable wrinkles, and they peered at one in the most curious manner from each side of a bony high-bridged nose. At first glance one might have thought there was a twist in them, but this illusion I found was due to their deep setting and an apparent endeavour to look across the ridge of his nose.

During dinner he and I talked a good deal of shop, he being particularly interested in the Palestine campaign. But it was not until after the meal, and we had adjourned to that far corner of the smoking-room where I had held more than one serious confab, that we broached the real matter at issue. Already I had been informed that the General had been in India for some forty years, that he was a personal friend of the late Governor of Bombay, that he knew Doctor Lal, and not a little of the reputation and methods of Leo Jask. But of Jask personally he knew nothing. That he was an active stirrer-up of trouble on behalf of the Soviet was beyond dispute ; also he appeared to be as elusive as he was dangerous. He was supposed to have spent large sums of money on Communist propaganda, all with the view of ultimately overthrowing the British Empire. Naturally such an infamous ideal was anathema to the good Briton, though personally, judging from certain signs, I was inclined to think that the disintegration of the empire, as was the case with most empires, was more likely to come from within than from without.

But of Doctor Lal he had more definite information. "One of those educated babus," he sneered in pukka Anglo-Indian fashion, "who are really the cause of all the trouble. Some people seem to forget," he con-

tinued, "that what was won by the sword must be held by the sword. We must rule or get out, and unless some strong man comes along pretty soon it's scuttle for a certainty. In fact, it looks to me as though we had already begun to pack."

"Then the hatred of British rule is universal?" I asked.

"Who loves his conqueror?" he replied. "You wouldn't, and I'll take my oath I wouldn't."

"But surely there are many loyal Indians?" I ventured timidly as became one who breathed in the presence of authority.

"A loyalty that depends on what may be got out of it," he countered with a fierce twirl of his moustache.

"A good description of loyalty," I suggested.

"We don't want their loyalty," he answered contemptuously, "we demand their obedience."

"At the point of the bayonet?"

"The only way to get it, and the army would soon see that it was got if it were given a free hand. It's these pusillanimous politicians who are always queering the pitch. They'll bungle and muddle till everything's at sixes and sevens, and then call us in to clean up the mess."

I stole a surreptitious glance at George and received a knowing wink. No doubt the General was in every respect an admirable soldier, but like many other admirable soldiers no great catch as a statesman. Besides, I knew he had nothing fresh to say, and I had no wish to behold him riding any of his pet hobbies. Therefore that look at George, who was quick on his cue.

"But surely Doctor Lal is an exception to the average educated babu?" he asked.

"It was always a mystery to me," was the reply, "as it was to many others who knew Sir Everard, how Lal ever wormed his way into Clanwell's confidence."

"Clever and loyal," I suggested; "two admirable qualities in the eyes of a ruler."

"And a bit of luck chuck'd in," added the General. "Clanwell was making a tour of one of the hospitals while suffering from a sharp attack of malaria. Lal happened to be on the spot. I suppose he's clever," he admitted grudgingly. "Anyway, he seemed to do the right thing then, and ever after Clanwell swore by him. But as to his loyalty—— Well, certain people were not particularly impressed by it."

"Why?"

"The native mentality, my dear sir. Once get inside it and you'll lose all faith in disinterestedness."

I don't know that I ever had much faith in it. But I did not explain, nor did I assume consciousness of his rebuke. Instead, I asked him if he really thought there was a mystery attached to Sir Everard's death. Again he twirled his moustache. Heart disease, rubbish! Clanwell was as sound as he was.

"Apart from Lal," I ventured, "there is the testimony of the ship's doctor."

"Do you know anything about ships' doctors?" he asked with a peculiar, intimate look.

"Not much."

He smiled. It must have appeared to him that I didn't know much about anything.

"Good fellows, of course, but not quite specialists, now are they?"

"Where is he at present?"

"No idea; but the P. & O. Company could tell you."

I looked at George; he nodded. Then we had another liqueur, much relished by the General, who was beginning to get red in the face, more than a little red of eye, and voluminously reminiscent. I tried to lead him back to Jask and his activities, and innocently remarked that he must be an extraordinary fellow to plot so boldly under the very nose of authority and yet escape detection.

"I don't know about his being so extraordinary," he said, "but being well provided with funds he was able to buy service. And not only native service," he added with a meaning look. "Anyway, he managed to obtain information of every move that was going on behind the scenes in time to frustrate it. Some people said he had spies even in the Viccroy's camp. Now I suppose you've never heard of Mrs. Asterley?" This he suddenly flung at us. "No, of course you haven't. Hushed up like lots of other things. No use letting the public in on every secret. You know a bit about that, Mayford?"

George smiled, flinging a quick look at me from under his jutting brows.

"Is the secret still official?" he asked.

"It's all over now, of course, but at the time it caused a bit of talk. You see, Anna Asterley—a devilish pretty woman, mark you!—was a bit of a mystery. Got entangled with a member of the Viccroy's staff. Some people said she was no better than an adventuress, and it was even whispereed that she

was in the pay of Moscow. Nothing known for certain, you understand, among those outside the pale, but a good deal suspected."

"I suppose there was a Mr. Asterley somewhere in the background?" George asked.

"Yes, generally spoken of as Captain Asterley. You know, 'temporary gentleman' stuff of the New Army."

I looked at George and smiled. Evidently he had not told the General that I was one of that despised class, and I forbore to put him wise, not wishing to embarrass the good man.

"And what became of him?" was George's next question.

"Nobody knows exactly. Some say he went to China or Persia after his wife had been quietly told that India could get along very well without her. Anyway, he was never heard of again. Probably executed by the Soviet. They have a swift and cheery way of disposing of the good and faithful servant."

He laughed rather stupidly and gave his moustache another twist. I sat back, watched and listened, while George plied him with further questions. But as he had told us all he knew that was of the slightest importance, and seemed anxious to go over it all again with quite unnecessary additions, I signalled to George that it was time we closed the conference. Apparently he thought so too, for he looked at his watch, sat up in alarm, and mentioned that he had to hurry round to the office having forgotten to leave an important instruction. Would the General have a final tot before he went? The General would. A whisky and soda?

Always took a peg the last thing at night. Nothing like it to sleep on. "Forty years, my children. Not likely to give it up now—what?" When he eventually rose his knees cracked loudly. George pushed an arm through his and steadied him, and after bundling him into a taxi returned to me and lit a fresh cigar.

"We must even suffer bores," he said, "in the interests of our country."

"We?"

"Of course he's an old ass, and I'm afraid you've made him very drunk, but it seems to me that he has given us a lead. The charming Anna Asterley may be worth cultivating. Ordered to leave India is a good one to start with. Friend of Doctor Lal's, and possibly of the ingenious and elusive Leo Jask. My dear Peter, the job was made for you. You know, it's astonishing how incident begets incident. Out of the strong came forth sweetness and light. Jask is the strong, you are the light, and Anna Asterley is the sweetness. If General Winslake hadn't called on me this morning, at the suggestion of Lady Clanwell, our charming Anna might have remained an enigma."

"And may still do so for all I care."

He continued without heeding my interruption. "What was yesterday but a dull and uninteresting report of an apparently trivial suspicion suddenly assumes a potentiality of the gravest import. Figure it out, my dear. Mysterious death aboard ship of an exalted personage; doubts; Doctor Lal, Leo Jask, and the charming Mrs. Asterley. Now then, who's your friend, who's always been your friend, who is he that never fails to think of you even when overburdened

with the affairs of state? At last I've found you something that ought to fill in your time till Julia's return."

The reply I was about to launch at him was suddenly cut short by the reappearance of Hughie Tabran, who floated in with a wistful expression on his face. George was quick to seize his opportunity. He sprang to his feet, hailed Tabbie as though he were an angel from heaven, and metaphorically flung him into my arms.

" You two lads talk it over," he said. " I must hurry off. See you to-morrow, Peter. *Adios!* " And he was gone.

" I say, old chap," Tabran at once began as he sank into the chair George had vacated, " I hope you won't think me a bore, but I'm not at all sure that everything's just as it ought to be over there at the May Fair. You know, I don't think it's altogether playing the game to come bothering you with my private worries, but I can't help thinking that—"

" What? "

" There's just a bit too much of that blighting little Indian."

" Doctor Lal? " He nodded. " In what way? "

" It's Cynthia. She doesn't get any better, and I don't like the look of it. I've tried my hardest to prevail on Lady Clanwell to call in a specialist, but she won't hear of it. Her faith in that little beast is incredible. And Cynthia's almost as bad, though I think she might agree if her mother could be prevailed on to act."

" And you have failed? "

" Yes."

"Then what more is to be done?"

"I wondered if—if you wouldn't mind trying. You see, I think it's vital. I believe Cynthia is positively *fading away*."

He appeared to be in such great distress that he broke down the barrier of my selfishness.

"What can I do? You forget that I am a comparative stranger. If Lady Clanwell won't listen to you how could I possibly prevail with her?"

"You have already impressed her enormously, and Cynthia too. They believe you're going to square things up."

"How did they come by that idea?"

"I don't know, but they've got it, and I believe they'd listen to you, might even be guided by you."

"Are you quite sure that you do not exaggerate my influence as well as the seriousness of Miss Clanwell's illness? It seems to me that if her mother were really convinced it would be little short of criminal on her part to neglect the obvious."

"Naturally she can't be, or she wouldn't hesitate. With Lal out of the way it might be different. You've no idea how besotted they are over the little swine. I'd like to twist his infernal neck."

Probably. Yet I could not help wondering if the knowledge that Lal and Mrs. Asterley were acquainted had not a little to do with his detestation of the Indian.

I tried to explain that I had really retired from business, and that I had called on the Clanwells, not with the intention of taking up their case, but merely as a favour to my friend Mayford. But seeing his anxiety and disappointment I went so far as to say

that I would think the matter over, while resolutely declining to promise action. He thanked me warmly, apparently perceiving in this more than was intended. I felt as though the fates were loading the dice against me.

CHAPTER V

EVIL INFLUENCE

THINKING a good deal over what Tabran had told me I actually began to wonder if there might be anything mysterious in the illness of Cynthia Clanwell. It was perhaps natural that he should be much annoyed at the influence of Doctor Lal, and fearful lest a hint might be dropped of his friendship with Mrs. Asterley. If Cynthia were a modern young woman the revelation would probably do little harm. But she might not be. In that case the incident might develop possibilities.

At first I was inclined to attribute his hostility to mere personal dislike of the doctor, but he was now beginning to show something more than dislike; he was almost accusatory. Clearly to his mind Lal had all along been a disturbing factor, and now that he was openly suggesting malpractices I was beginning to wonder if there were any real grounds for his suspicion. Though he knew nothing of that meeting of the four in Soho, it had left more than a lingering doubt in my mind as to the entire trustworthiness of the Indian. If what General Winslake had said of Mrs. Asterley was true, and I never for a moment doubted his good faith, what was Lal doing in such a galley? His reputation for loyalty was not likely to be enhanced

by association with one who had been warned out of India. On the other hand, he might be ignorant of that escapade, and flattered by the friendship of a pretty white woman.

However, early the next morning I rang up Lady Clanwell and asked when it would be convenient for me to call on her. She answered, "Just a moment, Colonel. Please hold the line." I guessed that she was consulting her daughter. When she spoke again it was to ask if I could come to lunch. I replied that I should be delighted.

"Will one o'clock suit you, Colonel Gantian?"

"Admirably."

"Thank you ever so much."

There was a sort of pathetic eagerness in her tone which I would rather not have heard. It seemed to suggest that an importance might be attached to my visit which it did not deserve.

In the hotel lounge I was received graciously by mother and daughter, and after the first cordial greetings a cocktail was suggested, which I declined, no *apéritif* being needed to titillate my appetite. Accordingly we went direct to the restaurant, where a table had been reserved for us. Though the place appeared to be well patronized I saw no one I knew. The band was playing a popular melody, and the whole scene was extremely bright and animated. Lady Clanwell handed me the wine list, saying she knew nothing of such things. I chose a light sauterne, and watched Cynthia as she made a pretence of drinking. She just moistened her lips. At the food she merely nibbled, much to her mother's alarm, whose most anxious entreaties failed to make her eat. "I'm not hungry,

mother," she would protest with a weary shake of her head. Lady Clanwell looked from her to me, as much as to say, "I don't understand it."

It was really pathetic the way the girl trifled with her food. I saw her make many a valiant effort, but without the least success. Catching me looking at her she smiled rather wistfully, a hopeless, wan smile that set conjecture all aglow. Half-way through the meal she began to fan herself with her handkerchief. I had not noticed that the atmosphere was oppressive, nor do I imagine had any of the others present. Yet I saw her grow paler and paler, and I knew that she was suffering a refined sort of torture.

"Mother, I think . . . if you don't mind. Please excuse me, Colonel Gantian."

She rose, staggering a little. I caught her hand to steady her. It was deathly cold. I offered to escort her to the lounge, but Lady Clanwell insisted that I should remain at table. She would return in a minute or so. Evidently this was not the first time that her daughter had been thus overcome.

Somewhat perplexing, all this, in the face of what Tabran had said, and the recognition of certain other suspicions. Was there here something exceeding coincidence? Thoughts of that gathering of the four in Soho restaurant obtruded, perhaps somewhat insistently. Doctor Lal the loyalist on friendly terms with a woman who had been ordered to leave India appeared exceedingly incongruous. In the midst of my cogitations Lady Clanwell returned.

"She is lying down," she explained, "and seems better already. I'm so sorry, Colonel Gantian. I can't understand it all. Doctor Lal assures me that

it is nothing really, but I wish I could share his optimism."

"You mentioned malaria, Lady Clanwell?"

"So Doctor Lal diagnoses it, and as you know he is one of our greatest authorities on the subject. My husband had the most implicit confidence in him," she added, as though to emphasize the unnecessariness of further argument.

"But Miss Clanwell's health does not improve?" I insisted.

"I'm sorry to say it doesn't."

"Of course you have called in other advice?"

"I couldn't very well do that. You see, the case is in Doctor Lal's hands. Besides, both Cynthia and I are confident of his skill. He really is an extremely clever man. In India his clinic was famous."

"So I understand. At the same time, if Miss Clanwell were my daughter I should not hesitate."

"To call in a stranger!" Much astonishment in this.

"A specialist," I said.

"I am sure Cynthia would never agree."

"You are her mother, Lady Clanwell."

"I see what you mean, and to tell you the truth I've often thought of it myself, but it would look as though we had lost faith in Doctor Lal."

"I suppose he has never suggested such a course?"

"I am sure he would if he thought it necessary."

Not much hope here of swaying a faith so profound. Had it not been for my knowledge of certain facts concerning Doctor Lal I should probably have been convinced that the right course was being pursued. I wondered if she had ever heard of Mrs. Asterley and

her ignominious departure from India, and if so, how she would construe Doctor Lal's association with that charming lady? But thinking the time was not yet ripe for such a disclosure I switched on to that other matter of Sir Everard's death, frankly confessing that I was yet no nearer a solution of the mystery. At this she seemed somewhat disappointed, not guessing that it was entirely on another account that I had rung her up. However, she suggested that we should take coffee in her private sitting-room as we could talk more comfortably there, a suggestion to which I at once acceded, and together we left the restaurant.

While we were talking Cynthia reappeared. She greeted us with a wan smile and seated herself next to her mother. Yes, she was feeling ever so much better, but she would not take coffee. Perhaps a cigarette. As I held the light for her our eyes met. There was a languid pathos in hers which was most appealing—and something more, something that set me wondering.

"My dear, Colonel Gantian is greatly distressed about you," her mother said.

She looked at me and smiled. "Oh, I'm quite all right now. I think it was the heat of the room, and the noise. I always did hate crowds."

"Always?" I asked.

"Well, lately. You see, I haven't been very well for quite a long time now."

"The Colonel suggests that we ought to call in other advice," said her mother.

"Oh, we couldn't do that. What would Doctor Lal think? You don't know how clever he is, Colonel Gantian."

I admitted that I didn't, but assured her that such action was not unusual, and was assured in return that there could not possibly be anyone in England with a knowledge of tropic diseases equal to his. So the matter as far as I was concerned looked pretty hopeless. And after all, I was no more than a comparative stranger whose business in life had nothing to do with the science of medicine.

Then, just as I was thinking of going, Doctor Lal himself entered. He seemed surprised to see me, though that surprise was but momentary. After the first greetings he sat himself beside Cynthia, murmured something in an undertone, took her hand, felt her pulse in the best professional manner, and with a smile pronounced an improvement.

"You are sure, Doctor?" Lady Clanwell asked anxiously.

"Perfectly certain," he said. Again he looked at Cynthia and kindly patted her hand. Though I could not see his eyes I saw hers, and I thought there was a sudden suggestion of fright in them. He then turned to me.

"You are still pursuing investigations, Colonel Gantian?"

"A most difficult case, Doctor."

"Yes, yes, indeed. Still, it is a great relief to know the matter is in such capable hands."

As he said this he flashed me a meaning look, which in the face of his admission of Sir Everard's pernicious habit I readily understood. If the inquiry was any consolation to these poor creatures let them enjoy the delusion. We understood each other perfectly.

But as I walked away from the hotel I thought of

that frightened look in Cynthia Clanwell's eyes. Why should she be frightened, and of what? On the other hand, could I have been mistaken? Was I gazing upon reality or letting imagination run away with me?

On reaching Cork Street, Albert informed me that Mr. Mayford had been on the 'phone. He rang up shortly after I had left. Wanted to know when I was likely to return, and when I did would I ring him up. Confound the fellow, and telephones, and all accessories which prevented a dereliction of duty.

I was in two minds about complying. Already I had gone farther in this business than I had intended, and it looked as though I might go farther still if I were not careful. Not that there appeared to be any great risk in it, which was a salve to conscience in the matter of my promise to Julia. And after all, if without committing myself I could be of service to an old friend, it would be churlish to stand aside. Moreover, and this was not without its effect, the thing was getting interesting. In spite of myself I was bestowing on it an attention which I felt was culpable.

After a few moments' delay I was put through to George. Of course we began with our usual banal facetiousness.

"If you won't leave me alone," I said, "you might spare Albert. You know I strongly object to having him annoyed."

"I know," he gurgled, "but I had to tell you that we believe Jask has arrived in England."

"Believe! Your policemen been asleep as usual?"

"Comes of your quitting the force. From information received——"

"Spare me!"

"Think there's anything in it?"

"I don't know and I don't care."

"Thought I'd just mention it to you."

"Thanks. Oh, by the way, was Sir Everard Clancwell rich?"

"Very. Why?"

"Curiosity."

"Molly wants to know when you're coming round for a bit of grub."

"Give her my love."

"I will. She's really frightfully fond of you."

"I know."

"And so is the boy. He's always asking for Uncle Peter."

"Poor little devil; I sometimes think he grows more like you every day."

"Some kids are born lucky. S'long."

"S'long."

While assuring myself that Jask's present domicile was a matter of indifference to me, I could not bring myself entirely to believe in that assurance. Much to my annoyance I found that the fellow was monopolizing more of my attention than I was willing to give. What, after all, did it matter to me if he had come to England, though I should have thought it the one country, if he were as wise as some people asserted, that he would be particular to avoid. There were those here who, while having plenty of sentiment to spare for struggling foreign communities, had none at all for those who suggested that the star of English freedom needed a little polishing. To attempt such a task was therefore dangerous and doomed to failure.

From this happy state of conviction I was suddenly

aroused by the telephone going again. More than ever I confounded the thing. Was it never to allow me a moment's peace? One of these days I intended to dispense with it altogether.

Albert entered. "At home, sir?"

"Better see who it is."

"Yes," he answered. "What name, please?" Then he turned to me, placing his hand over the mouthpiece. "A lady, sir."

"Did she give her name?"

"Said she wanted to speak to you."

Thinking it might be Lady Clanwell, and that she might have accepted my advice regarding a second opinion, I took the instrument from him and answered. Immediately came the query, but not in Lady Clanwell's voice, or the line was singularly out of tune, "Is that Colonel Gantian?"

"Speaking."

"Ah, yes, of course it is. This is Mrs. Asterley."

"Oh, how do you do!"

"Thanks, I am very well. And you?"

"Nothing to complain of."

"Lucky man. I hope you don't mind my ringing you up?"

"Delighted," I murmured.

"Then why haven't you called? You disappoint me."

"I'm sorry."

"Prove it."

"How?"

"By coming round to tea. You know you promised." (I was not aware of this) "I've been expecting you."

"So frightfully busy," I explained.

"I believe you had forgotten."

"How could I?"

"That's much better." Her laugh was low and very pleasant. "Are you frightfully busy at the moment?"

Thinking quickly I answered, "Not too frightfully busy."

"Then I shall expect you."

The instrument clicked. Slowly I replaced the receiver. It had suddenly come to me that a further knowledge of Mrs. Asterley might not be inimical to progress. Discretion whispered caution. She had been described as a dangerous woman. Dangerous to whom? Certainly not to me. In fact, I would scarcely be playing the game taking her at such a disadvantage. While knowing so much about her she could know nothing of me. The cards were stacked against her. Decidedly it wasn't fair. I felt rather ashamed of the mean thought which had suddenly prompted me to accept the invitation.

In answer to my ring the door was opened by a hard-featured foreign-looking woman who, relieving me of my hat and stick, at once conducted me to the drawing-room, informing me in a foreign accent that "Madame would see me in a moment." I bowed and she withdrew.

It was the same room into which Tabbie Tabran, Count Solini and I had been shown on the night of our first meeting, and looked not quite so bright in the daylight. Even its barenness seemed more than a trifle accentuated by the faded colours of the cushions. Probably a mere resting-place by the way, a temporary

refuge to suit occasion. One could not imagine a woman of taste making a home of it.

My speculations, however, were quickly cut short by her entrance. She came towards me, hand outstretched, a charming smile on her extremely charming face.

"This is really so nice of you, Colonel Gantian."

"Not at all," I murmured. "Delighted."

Undoubtedly an attractive woman. Rarely, if ever, had I seen a more animated face. Eyes spoke with the lips, and pretty eyes they were, the irises curiously brown-tipped. I caught myself wondering how I had come to think of them as hard. Her hair shone like burnished bronze. It was beautifully waved. Her gown was brownish—beige I think they call it—her shoes and stockings matched. She motioned for me to sit in a corner of the sofa, stuffed cushions behind my back and laughed showing her white teeth. "I know how you men like comfort," she said. A most delicious perfume emanated from her person. Then she placed an occasional table before the sofa and going to the door called out, "Teska!" Returning she seated herself beside me, but at a discreet distance.

The foreign woman brought in the tea things and departed, closing the door after her.

"I call this comfy," murmured my hostess. "Do you really like tea, or would you rather have something stronger?"

I assured her that I was a tea addict; she admitted that she would expire without her afternoon cup. She had pretty, capable hands on which much care had been expended. There was a silver dish of fancy cakes, a plate of thinly cut bread and butter, and

another of hot buttered toast. She nibbled at a sugared cake while I attacked the toast, not having much of a sweet tooth.

Really an excellent hostess who never let the conversation flag. As a consequence I felt a bit dull, which dulness she graciously refused to recognize. Trivialities of all sorts came tripping from her tongue. Night clubs, theatres, dances, dinner-parties, and then more seriously, as seemed to befit the subject, politics. I asked her if she was interested in the political questions of the day. "Not at all," she declared with charming frankness, "but one can't avoid the subject if one reads the papers."

Then she touched on soldiering, and though I tried to put up the shutters when she approached shop, she drew from me the fact that I had served in Palestine, and said she thought it must be very wonderful to be a soldier. I did not attempt to undeceive her. From Palestine to India was no great jump. She asked me if I had ever been there. Truthfully I told her no, and meanly asked if she had.

"Once, for over a year," she said. "My husband was in the Indian Army."

"Was?"

"It's a wretched story." Rather despondently she shook her head. "Oh, I don't mind your knowing. It was pretty common property out there. Cards and . . . Oh, well, he disappeared. Was last heard of in Persia, fighting. He was killed there. Do have another cigarette."

"Thanks."

This was getting interesting. Was the story told by General Winslaké true, and was she wilfully attempt-

ing to deceive me? Probably he had spoken in the best of faith, repeating the tale as he had heard it. But did he know for certain of its truth? One realizes that rumour loses nothing by repetition.

She struck a match and held it to my cigarette. Around the corners of her mouth there was the ghost of a smile.

"Are you a great friend of Tabbie's?" she asked.

"A very good friend," I assured her.

"Has he been saying dreadful things about me?"

"On the contrary, he is a profound admirer."

"These boys," she said, "they are embarrassingly serious at times."

"They think life serious."

"Perhaps it is."

When I rose to go she did not press me to stay.

"Now you know your way here," she said.

"Thanks. I've enjoyed our chat immensely."

"Then please don't forget to come again."

What could I do but promise? Leaving the building I crossed over to the Park, dropped on the first empty bench, and frankly admitted that I was disappointed. At close quarters she had proved a by no means formidable person. Had it not been for the knowledge of Doctor Lal, and of a certain gathering of four at the Café Rivoli, I might even have imagined that rumour had treated her with extreme courtesy.

Returning to my rooms I was met by Albert in the hall and informed that Mr. Tabran was in the sitting-room. Entering, I found him in my easiest chair enveloped in a cloud of smoke. I noticed that the ash-tray beside him was laden with cigarette ends. The whisky and soda was also close at hand.

He rose hurriedly and began to apologize.

"I wanted to see you awfully. Hope you don't mind my butting in like this."

"Delighted, my dear fellow. What's the trouble now?"

"Lal!"

"Still the villain of the piece?"

"Who else? Cynthia was as cold as a block of ice. Questioned me about Mrs. Asterley."

"Seriously?"

"That's almost a part of the trouble; I wish she had." I looked at him. "She's never really serious about anything these days; much too indifferent. But you see now that I was right in my estimate of that little viper. And there's something more."

"Oh!"

"He's getting presumptuous, taking a bit too much on himself. Lady Clanwell told me of your visit, and of Cynthia's sudden attack of giddiness. Can't we do something about it?"

"Apparently not while their faith in him remains unshaken."

"But you think they ought to take other advice?"

"Sure of it."

"I've been an awful fool," he said. I sympathized.

"You mentioned Doctor Lal's presumption?"

"I don't like his tone, his familiarity, and I don't think he ought to be allowed a free hand. His influence is evil. I believe that in some way or other he is getting control of her mind. At times she doesn't seem to have a mind at all. It's horrible! Her eyes! Do you know what I mean? Vacancy! All interest

in things going or gone. Slack! Doesn't care; atrophy. Her mother's a fool!"

"Does she know anything about Mrs. Asterley?"

"I don't know."

"How did Cynthia really take it?"

"As she takes everything, with complete indifference. Even her questioning was casual, as though a thought had flashed through her mind and then vanished. If she had only gone for me it would have been a relief, but she seemed to tire of the subject, or forget it, as soon as it was started. Now that's not right, old man, is it?"

I had to admit that it was far from right, and was almost inclined to believe that his dreadful suggestion had a substratum of truth in it. For I too had noticed that vacancy of eye in Cynthia Clanwell, that curious lassitude of mind and body which proclaimed the presence of no ordinary complaint. Yet it seemed incredible that this man, received with confidence, honoured, applauded, could . . . Ambition might have lured; the girl was rich, and some men of colour have an insatiable desire to possess a white woman.

As far as I could see there was nothing to do but watch and wait. Something might come along, something that would open the eyes of those two confiding women. I was sorry for Tabbie, who appeared to be genuinely distressed, but could see no way of further helping him. And once more I told myself that all this bother was really no affair of mine. As it was, I had plunged deeper into it than I had intended, and could not congratulate myself on the success of my intervention. Nor could I see how the Indian's authority was to be undermined. Tabbie might

splutter, accuse, and make a considerable fool of himself, but it was not for me openly to join in the crusade. Of course there was Mrs. Asterley. Something might be got out of her, but not much. That she knew Lal was no proof that she knew anything to his detriment. And even supposing she had known anything detrimental, was it likely that she would give him away? But for that meeting of the four at the *Café Rivoli* I might have thought the doctor had become an obsession with Tabbie. Yet knowing of it I could not treat that obsession as lightly as it apparently deserved.

After he had gone I lit a pipe, took up a book, and tried to forget him and his suspicions; but the oily, *chi-chi* accent of the little Indian kept ringing in my ears, and I saw between the lines Anna Asterley's grey-blue eyes with their brown-rimmed irises, smelled the sweet perfume of her clothes, and was considerably annoyed. Confound them all, I thought; I'll wash my hands of the whole business. And just then, as if in mockery, buzz-buzz went the preposterous telephone again. Furiously I sprang up. The infernal machine should be removed. I would have no more of it.

It was George Mayford gurgling along the line.

"Curse you!" I snarled at him.

"Just wanted to tell you that the Italian Embassy knows nothing of your friend Count Solini. But of course that doesn't mean that he's not a Count. They swarm like bees on the Continent."

"George, you're futile."

"If you fling any more bouquets at me I shall die of an aromatic pain in the . . ."

I snapped him off. Albert was looking on with that

odd suggestion of a smile round the corners of his mouth.

"We'll have this instrument of torture disconnected," I said.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm sick to death of it. Never know a moment's peace."

"No, sir. Shall I see about it at once?"

"At once."

"Very good, sir. I'll tell the porter that should any message come through from New York . . ."

"That beats us, Albert," I admitted.

"I'm afraid it does, sir."

CHAPTER VI

A PHOTOGRAPH

PLAYING with fire is proverbially a dangerous game. Yet there are those who seem to find the pastime attractive, and I have reluctantly come to the conclusion that I must be one of them, which has always seemed inexplicable to me. For though I had often been burnt I invariably returned to trifle with the cause of my discomfiture. Which I confess was more than curious, considering that I believed myself to be enamoured of the quiet life. As the sailor who has spent long years at sea yearns pathetically for a peaceful job on land, so I, who had seen much turmoil in my time, knew that I had only one ambition in life, and that was to be left quietly alone. I had experienced too many hard knocks to have the slightest affection for them. Card players say that the cards never forgive. One day luck will leave a man stranded.

Which is all apropos of Mrs. Asterley. She was probably fire, and might be dangerous. Yet no one will deny that a fire is fascinating, especially on a cold night. And, metaphorically, both my nights and days were cold while I waited for the genial warmth of Julia's presence. Had she been in London, George Mayford, Tabbie Tabran and all the rest of them

might have gone hang for all I cared. But idle hands grow restive, and probably there was in me an innate sense of intrigue which had an irresistible urge. Moreover, I knew I was immune, proof against all insidious attack. And Cynthia Clanwell was undeniably in danger, the source of which was not yet perfectly known. If I could be of service here I might make two lovers happy, in my own happiness feeling profoundly generous. The point to be decided was this : Was Mrs. Asterley the key to the situation ? Tabbie had called her a dangerous woman ; General Winslake had repeated a story of misdeeds in the Orient which, even if over-coloured, may have had enough truth in it to justify one's belief in her adventurous spirit.

The next day, happening to be in the neighbourhood of Knightsbridge, what more natural than I should call, especially after having received such a gracious invitation ? Entering the lift I was quickly whirled to the fourth floor. It was not until then that I fully realized a possible misconstruction might be drawn from this visit. But in for a penny in for a pound I thought as I traversed the long corridor. I had grown accustomed to awkward situations.

As I stood before the entrance of her flat to make sure of the number, the door suddenly opened and no less a person than Doctor Lal came forth. Behind him stood Mrs. Asterley, neat and smiling as usual. But as she recognized me her smile faded, to be immediately restored.

"Colonel Gantian !" she exclaimed. "This is nice of you. Do you know Doctor Lal ? "

"The doctor and I have already had the pleasure of meeting."

The doctor agreed that it was a pleasure and held out his hand, a thin little hand that seemed all skin and bone. It was limp and cold, and offered no resistance to my crushing. Then he turned to her, a curious smile twisting his blue-black lips.

"You will be very careful," he admonished. "The climate is extremely treacherous at this time of the year."

"Trust me to follow your advice to the letter."

Climate—treacherous—advice—and the elevating of an eyebrow.

"Then I will be getting along," he said. He turned to me. "To-day you have not called on our friends at the hotel?"

"No. Is Miss Clanwell better?"

"Much, I am pleased to say. Presently she removes to the country. It will be pleasant for her."

"Ought to do her no end of good."

"I think so."

He bowed and pranced away on his little feet.

"Funny little man," she said as she led the way into the drawing-room, "but extraordinarily clever."

"I've heard that he is a great authority on tropic diseases."

"The very greatest. You see, I still occasionally suffer from the effects of malaria. He was recommended by an old Indian friend. I think it was awfully lucky of me to get him, don't you?"

"Awfully."

"Which is it to be this time, tea or cocktail?"

"Isn't it rather late for tea?"

"I thought it would be."

There was a strong smell of cigar smoke in the room. Looking at the ash-tray I could see nothing but cigarette-ends.

"You know," she said as she handed me the drink, her brown-rimmed eyes close to mine, and sparkling, "this is really splendid. Chin-chin."

"Chin-chin," I repeated as we clinked glasses. She laughed low in her throat.

"Who is this Miss Clanwell?" she asked suddenly.

"Has Tabbie never told you?"

"Tabbie?" she frowned. "What makes you think that he should?"

"Then you're not jealous?" I ventured.

"Of Tabbie! Good gracious, what an idea! What has the young fool been saying?"

"Most of us have a weakness for talking of our prospective happiness."

"Not all of us," she replied, suggestively sly. But I refused to fall for it. Was it possible that she could have heard of Julia? If of her, then perhaps of other matters of which I had rather she remained ignorant. I mentioned Count Solini, doubtless with some undue haste. She believed he was in the country, but where she had no idea. Her manner suggested indifference. Italian, of course, I said; must be with a name like that. She thought not; in fact, believed he came from one of the Central European countries. Didn't know for certain, and apparently didn't care. Rather a heavy bore, essentially continental. One had to be civil, of course; but foreign mentalities were beyond her comprehension, and life was too short to worry.

"But you haven't told me yet who Miss Clanwell is," she said.

"She is the daughter of Sir Everard Clanwell, late Governor of Bombay. You never met him when you were in India?"

"He was not Governor in my time."

"Died suddenly on the voyage home. Heart attack."

"Ah, yes, I remember now Doctor Lal speaking of him. He was on board at the time."

"And now his daughter is ill—of the same complaint."

"And Doctor Lal is attending her?"

"Yes."

"Then she couldn't be in better hands. He's really marvellously clever."

"So I've heard."

"And Tabbie is also interested in the patient?" she smiled.

"Rather."

As I rose to go she came close and looked meaningfully at me with her brown-tipped eyes.

"You don't really think I'm jealous of him?"

My smile was non-committal. "He's rather a nice boy."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Some men are quite good actors," she said.

"As good as women?"

"We could be better with advantage."

"We admire," I admitted.

"Chiefly yourselves, I believe. You're all alike. Do come again soon."

Not much in the way of success to boast of; not

even a flattering of vanity. So much the better; it made my getting-out easy. Mrs. Asterley ceased to interest; adventure and she seemed miles apart. Even Doctor Lal might have been unjustly assailed by the excitable lover. And Count Solini was a "heavy bore," and the *Café Rivoli* a more or less respectable alien restaurant at which four friends had agreed to take lunch. But there was certainly a smell of cigar smoke in the flat if there was no tangible sign of the smoker.

As I was dressing for dinner George Mayford dropped in. Like Count Solini, he also gave promise of becoming a heavy bore. Yet he was a cheery sort of chap and I was really very fond of him.

"If Mahomet won't come to the mountain," he began.

"You're that all right. Sit down and drink."

"I believe you think I do nothing but drink."

"And eat."

I was glad to see him, for I no longer feared him, and presently I intended to pull his mare's-nest to pieces. Mrs. Asterley "dangerous," and Doctor Lal, and the formidable Jask! Poor old George, poor old blundering, red-faced bulldog! There would be no need to violate that scared promise to the adorable one.

"Count Solini is no longer at the Ritz," he informed me.

"When are you coming along with a little information?"

"Then you knew?"

"Naturally."

"Perhaps you also know where he is?"

"In the country."

"What part?"

"Is it worth while inquiring?"

"It might be."

"That's a job for your policemen."

"Bit cocky, ain't you?"

"With every reason. Julia's coming."

"When?" "This rather quickly.

"Very soon." He grunted. "Hog!" I flung at him. He gurgled in his glass. That was the worst of him; he drank badly. "Shove your trotters in," I suggested.

"Jask," he said.

"A figment."

"A bit came through about him. No longer *persona grata* in the Red Capital. Possibly short of funds; will have to work hard for a living. Railway trouble in the Midlands fizzling out; threatened strike at the docks averted. No money . . . at least for Jask. It's hinted they'd like to have him back at Soviet headquarters. You know what *that* means? Not quite so successful in India as he was in China, though a coup in England might mend matters; England, the last great stronghold of privilege and property, the formidable Gibraltar-like obstacle confronting the tide of progress. Get me?"

"You're a poem, George."

He pulled a photograph from his pocket and handed it over.

"Ever seen anyone like this?"

It was obviously a cutting from a newspaper, badly reproduced, and pasted on cardboard. It showed a man heavily bearded, with a mop of thick hair and

staring eyes. The eyebrows were sparse and seemed to run upwards to a point, which, in spite of the beard, added an Oriental cast to the countenance.

"No. Who is it?"

"Jask."

"The man of many faces?"

He put his hand over the mouth and beard.

"Look now. Does it seem more familiar?"

The hiding of the lower part of the face threw the forehead into relief; a curious forehead that seemed to run back in a flat sort of way with the hair receding on each side of the centre. Memory stirred vaguely. Though I studied the portrait still more closely I could come to no decision. Those staring eyes baffled me. I shook my head. George returned the photograph to his pocket.

"Of course it's one of his many faces," he said, "but the eyes are rather uncommon."

"The eyes of a fanatic," I suggested.

"He's all that and probably more, much more. By the way, how's Mrs. Asterley coming along?"

"A very charming woman, George, and clever."

"How clever?"

"I hate conundrums. Seen General Winslake lately?"

"Not since that night."

"If you should drop across him you might ask him who was the Governor of Bombay when our charming friend was deported."

"What are you trying to get at?"

"I've just told you I hate conundrums. Now run home to Molly like a good fellow. I want to finish my letter to Julia."

" Give her my love, and tell her I am still watching over you like a mother."

But though rid of his presence I could not quite beguile myself into forgetting the photograph. There was about it something that made an irresistible appeal to memory. Where had I seen the like, or something like it? Try as I would I could not link up the chain of ideas. And yet I felt convinced that somewhere I had seen, if only in a dream, that broad receding brow with the curious peak of hair. But I failed utterly to associate it with those staring eyes. No one that I had ever met had such eyes. I could not have forgotten them, wild, daring, provocative; eyes that flung a defiance at the world.

Nor was it until some time later, while casually strolling round to the club, that the thought suddenly flashed in on me. Could it be? Was it possible?

CHAPTER VII

JULIA'S CABLEGRAM

BY the first post on the following morning I received a note from George Mayford. It said:

"Concerning a certain deportation. Sir Everard Clanwell was Governor of Bombay at the time."

So the charming Mrs. Asterley had lied to me; no great shock, I admit, though rather instructive. Association with Doctor Lal suddenly assumed a sinister aspect. How old had been that association, or friendship? Had they known each other out there? Scarcely possible, one would think. Lal a devoted and loyal subject, the other anything but devoted and loyal. But Sir Everard Clanwell had died under what some believed to be suspicious circumstances, and his daughter, in the hands of the same physician, was losing her grip on realities. To me it seemed most ominous; full time something was done if the situation were to be saved.

That afternoon I called at the May Fair, having previously rung up Lady Clanwell to know if it would be agreeable for her to receive me. She extended an eager welcome.

"So glad you have come, Colonel. I was wondering if I dared ask you. I'm simply worried to death."

And she looked it. Her eyes were wide and wildly

excited, with dark shadows beneath them; the fine lines round her mouth were painfully drawn. Indeed it seemed to me that she was almost in as bad a way as her daughter. I pressed her hand reassuringly.

"I sincerely trust Miss Clanwell is no worse?"

"She is no better, unhappily. But it's not that. Something else—very dreadful—has happened. Doctor Lal has asked my permission to marry her. Think of it; my daughter the wife of a *native*! It's too horrible!"

I was not altogether surprised, though just a little taken aback. I suggested that there was a great difference between asking permission and receiving it.

"But you don't understand," she continued excitedly. "So great is his influence over her that she doesn't seem to see anything horrible in the idea. Even I weaken in his presence, and know that I am weakening. The thought terrifies me. I feel, I know, there is a danger, and that I am incapable of fighting against it. He is a strange, compelling man. In his presence I seem to realize that he is beginning to control me as he does Cynthia. It's horrible, horrible!"

She turned aside, covering her eyes with her hands as though to shut out some unpleasant sight. When she turned to me again those eyes were unnaturally bright, but there were no tears in them; rather a hard, vacant terror.

"I don't understand it," she continued excitedly. "Why should I feel so powerless, so utterly feeble, when he takes my hand and looks at me? Your hand gives me courage; but his . . ." She shuddered, her shoulders contracting. "I see now what you

meant when you suggested other advice. Yet my husband . . . all of us. How could I imagine . . . I can hardly think it even now."

Her voice trailed away to a frightened whisper. Yet her incoherences were not difficult to follow.

"Where is Miss Clanwell?"

"In there, lying down." She pointed to the folding door. "She has been there ever since his visit."

"When was that?"

"His usual time, shortly after lunch."

"He comes daily?"

"Sometimes twice a day."

I looked at the door. "Is one permitted? Remember, I am not a doctor."

"You are more," she said, "you are a friend."

The room contained two beds. Cynthia was lying in the one nearest the window. Though between the sheets, she wore a pale blue silk kimono edged with red. Seeing us, a bewildered expression crossed her face. She looked up at me with large vacant eyes.

"Colonel Gantian to see you, dear."

She smiled, but ever so feebly. I advanced to the foot of the bed and looked at her. Her face was colourless, her eyes sunken. The dark shadows beneath them seemed to accentuate their weird pathos. She stared as though trying to understand why I had come. I never felt more uncomfortable, and after a few commonplaces was glad to beat a retreat. Lady Clanwell looked at me inquiringly as though expecting a pronouncement.

"If you wish to save your daughter," I told her, "you will call in other advice without a moment's delay."

" You think . . . "

" Her condition is serious, very. Though I am not a medical man I've had experience enough to know that."

" She will never give her consent."

" You must act without it."

" But Doctor Lal," she quavered.

" The door must be shut on him. It's the only way to save your daughter—and yourself."

" What do you mean ? "

" Has he been prescribing for you ? "

" Yes, of course ; but—"

" Unless you want to become like your daughter you will take no more of his prescriptions, and see that she takes none either."

" But I don't understand," she faltered.

" Doctor Lal is not to be trusted. He is not the loyal friend your husband believed. He is working for his ends—your daughter and her fortune."

" Impossible ! "

" In the face of what he has asked you ? "

" Of course, of course ; I'd forgotten. It's too dreadful ! Are you sure ? "

" Pretty. This is a job for my friend Mr. Mayford and his police—after I have sent you a specialist from Harley Street. And above all, no admittance to Doctor Lal."

" But he may insist—make a scene."

" I will see that you have full protection." I patted her hand. " Now be brave, for your own sake as well as your daughter's. Everything's going to be all right. Only you must face this crisis with courage."

Downstairs I rang up Doctor Roper-Lees and luckily

found him at home. He promised attendance within the hour. Then I turned my attention to George Mayford and told him I was coming along at once, and within ten minutes I was seated in his office giving him full particulars.

"Then Tabran's not such an idiot after all," he remarked in apparent surprise.

"You understand, George, they must have protection in case that little dog turns up."

"Leave that to me. Peter, this gives us a bulge on Doctor Lal, and possibly—"

"Quite so; but don't blunder."

"Not while I've got you to do it for me," he grinned.

"Me! Oh, I'm through. What you have to do now is keep awake."

"I'll try."

"You might also get through to Lady Clanwell and tell her to let you know as soon as the specialist arrives."

"Peter, you think of everything."

"I have to where you're concerned."

Returning to my rooms in no settled or amiable frame of mind, having no longer a doubt of Doctor Lal's ingenious and sinister design, I was met by Albert, who handed me an envelope. Glancing at it I saw it was a cablegram, and guessed from whom it had come. Opening it I could scarcely believe my eyes. It ran: "Leaving by *Berengaria* to-day." There was no signature, but that did not matter. I knew who the sender was. Looking at Albert, who must have read the news in my face, I saw him regarding me with a curious, expectant smile.

"She's coming, Albert; Miss Julia's coming!
She's leaving New York to-day!"

"Isn't that wonderful, sir!"

"It's great! Now we've got to get things ship-shape and mind our p's and q's. Let me see, this is Wednesday. By next Tuesday she ought to be in Southampton. Get on to the Cunard Company and ask them when the *Berengaria* is due."

While he was doing this I wandered about the room telling myself that she was coming, Julia was coming! Lal and Jask and all the rest of them vanished into nothingness. There was only one thing that mattered now.

"Your calculation was accurate, sir," Albert was saying. "They'll let us know when she arrives at Cherbourg."

Being a lover I was full of sympathy for lovers. I told him he could take the week-end off, run down to Sevenoaks, and have a look at his Flo, the redoubtable sergeant-major. But he did not jump at the offer. Indeed he flatly refused to entertain it. There was no hurry, he said; that sort of thing could wait. That sort of thing could wait! Impossible fellow!

I had now no difficulty in coming to a decision respecting the business into which George Mayford had inveigled me. As far as I was concerned it was definitely finished; I was through with it. Julia should not know that I had even touched it. Upon her arrival our marriage should follow with the least possible delay. I would whip her abroad to the shores of the Mediterranean and the Adriatic. Already we had decided on the principal item of our itinerary, and promised ourselves a glorious time.

George could now look after Lal and Miss Clanwell. I foresaw no further danger in that quarter once the Harley Street man was installed.

I dined at the club that night, and was just finishing the first meal I had really enjoyed for a long time when Tabbie Tabran came in and seated himself at the table. He looked flushed and excited, and although he would not touch my wine he asked me if I would take coffee with him in the smoking-room. Knowing he had something to say I agreed. He rose and left me saying he would order it.

The news, as I expected, was of the Clanwells. The man from Harley Street had come, there was something of a scene with Cynthia, who still clung to her belief in Doctor Lal, but the mother prevailed. He understood the case was rather serious. Had I any particular information? Had they shut Lal out? I assured him that they had, or would. He was to worry no more. Everything would be all right now. He was profuse in his thanks, or would have been if I hadn't cut him short.

"You see I was right about Lal," he said. "Shouldn't wonder if he knows a bit about Sir Everard's death."

Nor should I. But I didn't tell him that I now took no more than an academic interest in that affair. Nor was I in the mood to listen to further abuse of Lal or anyone else. I had cut it all out. Another matter more intensely interesting was afoot.

The next morning George looked in on his way to the office. Already Tabbie had forestalled much of his report. Upon the arrival of Roper-Lees, the specialist, Lady Clanwell had rung him up and he

had hurried round to the May Fair. He understood there had been something of a scene, but for once the mother had stood firm. Roper-Lees was rather reticent at first, but learning something of the situation looked very grave. The patient would need careful watching before he could pronounce definitely on the nature of her illness, but he frankly acknowledged that he was far from satisfied.

While they were talking, Lal appeared, and was refused admittance to the sick-room. Some sharp words passed between the medical men. "Then I introduced myself," George continued, "took Lal by the arm and led him into the corridor. He was tremendously annoyed, and sputtered a good deal, but I told him quite plainly that his treatment of Miss Clanwell was not appreciated, that he was forbidden to approach her again, and that if he ever attempted to do so he would probably come in contact with the police.

"He professed to treat the matter with amused contempt, told me that Roper-Lees was little better than a pretentious quack who knew absolutely nothing of tropic diseases, and that presently Lady Clanwell would discover her mistake, realize the necessity of recalling him, and humbly apologize.

"Now it's fairly evident to me," he continued, "and I think to you also, that the little scoundrel has been playing a game of his own with a view to annexing Miss Clanwell and her fortune. Such being the case, and the man's professed loyalty no longer a doubtful quantity, it is just possible that the suspicions concerning Sir Everard's death may not be without justification. Anyway, the matter grows in

interest, and we have at last something tangible to work on."

"We?"

"I said 'we.'"

"I heard you, but I'm through."

"Through!"

"Julia left New York yesterday."

At this his eyes widened. "Oh, did she! How nice."

"So you see, I'm fading out of the picture. We shall go to Italy. It was decided on before she left. The quiet life at last, George."

"Perhaps."

A nasty insinuation in this, but I passed it over.

"You won't say anything to her about this business?"

"Not a word."

"As you know, I really didn't take it up seriously."

"I know, just keeping your hand in; something to pass the time. Never come across Count Solini again, I suppose?"

"Only once."

"Where was that?"

Thinking it might interest him I told him of that meeting of the four at the Café Rivoli. Up went his heavy brows, an astonished and upbraiding gesture.

"Who was the fourth?" he asked.

"Haven't the least idea."

"Had you ever seen him before?"

"Once, at lunch with Mrs. Asterley. They interested me rather."

"In what way?"

"I heard them casually mention the name of your friend Jask."

"Was he at all like the photograph I showed you?"

"Not the least."

"Then that doesn't help us."

"You, George; I'm out of it, for keeps."

"I wonder who that fourth was," he mused, as though he had not heard me.

"Perhaps Jask himself," I ventured with a smile.

"Maybe you're right as usual, without knowing it," he grunted. "Anything is possible with a woman like Mrs. Asterley. It might be interesting to know the real meaning of her association with Lal."

"Purely professional, George. He is her medical attendant. Occasionally she suffers from twinges of malaria."

"But rarely from twinges of conscience?"

"Who shall say?"

He continued: "Sir Everard Clanwell was Governor of Bombay at the time of her deportation. Doctor Lal, an eminent authority on tropical diseases, was his Excellency's medical adviser. It is just possible that Mrs. Asterley had twinges of malaria in India. An interesting mix-up, Peter."

Sly dog, but not sly enough to entrap me with such bait.

"Let us talk of Julia," I said. "Think of it, George; every day now, every hour, every minute . . ."

He rose hastily; I thought he would. There was a heavy frown on his brow.

"See you again before she arrives."

"If you're lucky. Know anything about the Adriatic?"

"Oh, go to the devil!"

After he had gone, not, I hope, to the devil, Albert and I discussed arrangements for Julia's reception. At first I thought she might like to return to the old suite at Grosvenor House which she and her brother John had occupied on the occasion of her last visit. But Albert, being a man of vision and sentiment (though his sergeant-major might have doubted the possession of this latter quality), pointed out that as Miss Julia would probably not be staying long in London, a suite in some hotel might be preferable. Besides, there would be memories at Grosvenor House. She would miss Mr. Wally and Miss Edna, and might feel a little lonely. On the whole he thought, if it met with my approval . . .

"And not too far away, sir," he suggested; "something near an' handy in case we should be wanted, quick." (The sly fellow!) "I suppose we'll take the car to Southampton, sir?"

"What if the vessel docks at night?"

"I'll keep in touch with the steamship company," he said.

Though meaning no longer to take an active interest in those matters which so far had engaged my attention, this did not preclude a visit of friendly interest to Lady Clanwell. Accordingly that afternoon I strolled round to her hotel, was graciously received, and heard a most reassuring report of her daughter. She herself was feeling infinitely better than when I last saw her, and thanked me over and over again for recommending Dr. Roper-Lees, who, while working

wonders, was still a little diffident in expressing an opinion as to the nature and cause of her daughter's illness.

No, she had neither seen nor heard of Doctor Lal since the day he had been refused admittance to Cynthia, who was still incapable of grasping the situation. Even now it seemed incredible that he could be a traitor. Had her husband been alive it would have given him the shock of his life. Within the next few days she hoped to be able to remove Cynthia from the hotel. They had a place near Abingdon, and would be delighted to see me at any time.

And then came what I had long expected and wondered why it had not come before. It concerned Tabbie. I was an old friend of his, was I not? Doctor Lal had suggested . . . Well, quite a number of unpleasant things. Not that she could believe any more in him; but . . . Precisely. I put in a good word for Tabbie. He was one of the best. So she always really thought. She knew his mother; a charming woman.

So here at any rate was one matter satisfactorily settled. That other, which George seemed to think so important, was now in his hands. If the stormy petrel Jask were in England and intent on mischief, the law must see to it that his subversive activities were curtailed. In any case, he was not likely to do much damage without plenty of money, and as report said that he was no longer in favour at Moscow it would seem that there was not much to fear from him.

The time dragged itself along with incredible heaviness. Winter was approaching, the days were drawing in. But that didn't matter much. We would soon

be out of the dreary dulness of it all revelling in the sunshine. And, anyway, winter with her would mean summer to me.

I engaged a charming suite for her at the May Fair overlooking the Square. Possibly it was not quite as near as I could have wished, but I reckoned on speeding round to her without any unconscionable delay, and as the arrangement met with Albert's entire approval I felt it left little to be desired.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ARRIVAL

THE *Berengaria*, carrying her most precious freight, was due at Southampton about 4 p.m. Already I had sent two telegrams to Cherbourg (in case one went astray) telling Julia that I would be at the dock to meet her. Albert, already dressed for the occasion in his smart dark-blue uniform, had provided me with an early breakfast, which I must admit I ate rather perfunctorily. But how could any man eat whose soul was fed with such a prospect! Julia was coming! The very air seemed to ring with the glad tidings.

When, about an hour later, I descended to the street, there was Albert standing by the car, spick and span as you please, a happy grin on his grim old face. Though it was against his principles and training to betray the least emotion I knew he was inwardly aglow. We were going on another adventure together, and this time a joyous one. No stabs in the back or murder lurking in dark corners, no doubt as to the issue. Sunshine and laughter, and wedding bells in the distance ready to peal.

It is perhaps scarcely necessary to say that we arrived at Southampton in good time. The agents informed me that the ship would arrive to schedule.

I haunted the water-front, gazing out to sea. Somewhere out there she was coming . . . coming!

I looked up at the towering side of the vessel, the rows of eager faces, and failed to discern her. But she saw me. A hand was raised, a handkerchief fluttered wildly, and there she was!

No, I was not the last on board that boat. Julia came towards me, hands outstretched, and oblivious of the onlookers I hugged her. In my ear she whispered, "Darling!" It was probably the greatest thrill of my life.

Laughing and blushing she led me to her stateroom. Another person was present, a young woman who was locking a suitcase. I held Julia at arm's length, looked at her, and then drew her to me. The young woman, looking up from her task, may have made a funny noise. I didn't know and I didn't care. Neither did Julia. But when I had released her she turned laughing to the girl.

"Elsie, this is Colonel Gantian."

"So I guessed," said the girl, her face breaking into a broad smile. She was a pretty little thing with big blue eyes and a laughing mouth.

Shaking hands with her I expressed the hope that she had had a pleasant voyage.

"After the first two days," she admitted, pulling a long face. "I should have just died if Miss Wallington hadn't nursed me like a mother."

"Elsie's first sea voyage," Julia explained.

On deck we encountered Albert. Julia went to him, hand extended, face beaming.

"Why, Albert, it's real good to see you again," she said.

"Thank you, miss. Have you had a pleasant voyage?"

"Very. You didn't forget my last injunction?"

"No, miss."

"Do I look as though he had? The fellow's been a positive nuisance."

Albert grinned. He grinned more than ever when she told him he had earned a vacation, thereby implying that someone else was in charge now.

Then followed the disembarkation and the ordeal of the customs. All heavy luggage, and there was a considerable quantity of it, was to go on by train. A few small parcels and a couple of suitcases were bundled into the car, Albert set her going, and soon we were buzzing along the London Road.

"This is just lovely," said Julia. "I feel as though I'm coming home."

"You are, my dear."

"Isn't it all wonderful, Peter!"

I admitted it was the most wonderful happening in the world, and so it was to me.

Mile after mile was reeled off. Albert sat grim and square at the wheel, his eyes glued to the road. Elsie, who sat beside him, began by chattering, but soon subsided, finding him not too responsive. Occasionally she would turn and look at us through the glass screen as if to make sure that we were still there, and perhaps prompted by other curiosity. But beyond asking Albert the name of every town and village through which we passed she left him severely alone. He would seem "real English" to her, stiff and proper.

Without mishap we duly arrived at our destination,

and after seeing Julia and her maid installed I left her, promising to return within the hour. We were to dine quietly in her sitting-room and have a good long talk. And what a talk it proved to be! I smoked and listened and admired. What with one thing and another there had been a lot of trouble over on the other side, but John, her brother, being the head of the family, had stood behind her, and everything had come out right.

I knew to what she referred. Some unpleasant things concerning our engagement had been said in the American Press. "More good American dollars going to Europe," and the like. It was an old cry, which I accepted for what it was worth. What did they know of our real affection, or that it would have been the same if there hadn't been a penny difference in our fortunes?

Of course all the papers next day announced that "Miss Julia Wallington, of New York," had arrived in London and had engaged a suite at the May Fair Hotel. There were also various references to the "Wallington millions," with a few particulars respecting the origin of the family. Her brother, Mr. John C. Wallington, head of the family, was also "well known" in London. At present he was believed to be on a honeymoon cruise in his superb yacht *Manhattan*. It was rumoured that Miss Wallington was engaged to an English officer, and that the date of the marriage would shortly be announced.

We laughed over it all, she and I, and went about our way. And what a time we had! Her many friends, of course, were something of a bore, but we managed to dodge most of them. Certain invitations

had of necessity to be accepted, but on the whole we managed to spend most of the time together. Preparations for our marriage were at once begun. She decided that it should be "very quiet." She was sick and tired of fuss, and I was one who had no hankering after publicity.

On the second day of her arrival George Mayford lunched with us. I warned him not to mention a certain happening, and he behaved himself quite nicely, even when she chaffingly told him how she had warned me against him. He shot a sly glance at me and murmured that he had always been my guardian angel, but that he now willingly resigned the job to one more worthy. He frankly admitted that I didn't deserve such guardianship, but I was one of those lucky fellows who always blundered into the best life had to give.

For a few moments we chatted in the lounge as I was seeing him off, and he at once began: "That Jask business is getting rather interesting."

"Then continue the good work, my son."

"Pity. You were beginning to get useful. Still, I can't expect now . . . Peter, I congratulate you; she's lovely. How she ever came to . . . But women are like that; never know what they'll fall for. It couldn't have been your beauty."

"Intellect, George."

"Must have been something that I was never able to discover. I suppose the Clanwells have left?"

"Some time ago."

"Lucky for you. Lady Clanwell is so grateful she might have given the show away. As it is . . . But you know I hate deceit. Just now, when Julia

turned her lovely eyes on me Fortunately for your peace of mind I am a man of stern principles. That maid of hers is rather a smart filly."

"Reprobate!"

"How does the incorruptible Albert hit it off with her?"

"He takes her to the Pictures."

"Guide, philosopher and friend. Well, well, it's a queer world."

Mention by him of the "incorruptible Albert" set me thinking. As cicerone to Elsie he had been in great demand. In some marvellous manner the lively little maid had overcome his grim taciturnity. Having been given permission to show her "the sights," he cheerfully performed his duties like the good soldier he was. One day he took her to the Abbey, another to the Tower, and of course he had to show her London Bridge, which failed to reach her expectations, the romance of it not being apparent. He excused frequent visits to the cinema by explaining that she was homesick, and that it cheered her up to see the New York skyscrapers, watch the doings of crooks, and hear them expatiate with a strong American accent. No doubt all very ingenuous and fully explanatory, but I was beginning to wonder if the vision of a certain sergeant-major down at Seven-oaks was growing indistinct.

A glorious ten days followed Julia's arrival. Love had avoided me so long that I was afraid he had made up his mind definitely to give me a miss. Accordingly when he did begin shooting he let fly a whole quiverful of arrows, piercing every vulnerable part. No doubt the lateness of his attack accounted for its severity.

The little beggar was doing his best to make up for lost time.

Meanwhile preparations for our wedding were not neglected. I saw to that. She laughed and said I could get a move-on when I wanted to. We studied maps and guide-books, and ticked off the various stages of our journey into Italy. Though the days flew by they could not fly fast enough for me. How she laughed at my impatience, enjoying the prolongation of my agony. You know, I rather think a girl is like that, and loves to let hang in the balance the thing she most desires, as though anticipation were almost too great a joy to part with.

So far I had avoided mentioning the Clanwells and their misfortunes. It was a matter I intended to reveal later on, when we were far enough away from London to make it all seem of singularly slight importance. I could see her shake a reproving head and call me "hopeless," just as she used to call her brother John, and of course I would kiss her and swear true allegiance henceforth and for ever.

But it was not to be like that. As I hurried round one night to take her out to dinner, with a reception to follow, I was met for the first time by a curious, cold constraint, and a questioning doubtful look in blue eyes that sorely puzzled me. Her fingers were limp and unresponsive, and with some apparent reluctance she gave me her cheek to kiss. Amazed, I asked anxiously if she were ill, and proceeded to voice my distress, which she cut short by flinging at me the question, "Who is Mrs. Asterley?"

It was the second time that question had been put to me, but with what a different effect! Probably,

taken thus unaware, I looked more or less guilty. She, seeing that look, stiffened and turned aside, her head up.

"How did you come to know of her?"

"Her husband has been to see me."

"Her husband! But she hasn't one."

"You seem to know all about it," she answered coldly.

"But he is supposed to be dead."

"To me he was very much alive."

"But I don't understand it. What did he come to see you about?"

"Would you really like to know?"

"Why, of course. Why not?"

"He said you had been pestering his wife with your attentions."

"But you didn't believe it?"

"My pride would scarcely let me. All the same . . ."

"Exactly. I didn't mean to tell you till later."

"Tell me what?"

"That I hadn't implicitly obeyed instructions."

"What instructions?"

"Yours, to avoid George Mayford and his affairs. Now you've got to know all about it."

I caught her hands, still cold and unresponsive, and led her to the sofa. Sitting beside her I told her how George had come to me with stories of Jask and his doings, and how he had tried to enlist my services. Then I went on to Tabbie Tabran, the Clanwells, and Doctor Lal. But she seemed more interested in Mrs. Asterley than any of the others, and not until I had minutely described every detail

of my intercourse with that lady did the frown clear from her brow, the doubting look from her eyes.

" Seems to me," she said, " that I can't trust you out of my sight."

" But, darling——"

" And as for George Mayford, I'll give him a talking to the first time we meet. Didn't I warn you against him ? "

" You did, darling."

" He's an insidious ginger-haired villain, and I hate him."

" He's all that, and more, and ought to be shunned like the plague. At the same time, as he's after these people, it would only be fair to let him know of this visit of the man who calls himself Captain Asterley. If that gentleman died fighting in Persia he couldn't possibly have visited you in the flesh. What was he like to look at ? "

" Dark, with a sallow complexion, and rather good-looking in a hard way."

" Thick-set, stout ? "

" No, rather elegant ; smartly dressed, and spoke like a man of education."

" With a foreign accent ? "

" Not the least."

Then it could not have been Count Solini. But there was another, the man I had seen lunching with Mrs. Asterley and who had made one of the four at the Café Rivoli.

" Did his manner suggest blackmail ? "

" It would be difficult exactly to describe it, but he said that the matter might prove decidedly unpleasant for all parties concerned."

"Of course he knew of our engagement?"

"He made a point of it."

"And your ultimate conclusion?"

"That given a chance, which I decidedly did not give him, he might become an annoyance. In fact, I referred him to you without discussing the subject, and more or less impolitely showed him the door."

Though the incident was distinctly annoying, it did not greatly worry me once I had convinced her of my integrity. The only thing for which I really blamed myself was the folly I had been guilty of in having touched the business, especially as I had promised to steer clear of anything of the sort. At the same time, that he should have described himself as Captain Asterley was not without a certain serious importance. By all accounts Captain Asterley was dead; yet here was a man who boldly announced himself as such. Clearly, the fellow was an impostor, or Captain Asterley had not died "fighting in Persia." In either case the matter carried a suggestion which I did not like, but which I was careful to hide from Julia. We, however, arranged that should she receive a further request for an interview she was to grant it, reserving sufficient time to communicate with me. Our meeting promised considerable entertainment.

And it was then I told her the secret of the Sign of the Glove. It came about in this way. When I entered that night I found her reading, or trying to read, a book, which she tossed aside as soon as she saw me. Now, while she had gone to her bedroom to put the finishing touches to her toilet, I picked up the book and looked at the title. It was Holmes's

Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table, a great favourite of mine, by the way. But as I turned back the cover I saw something which made me start, though it was only a small adhesive label with the drawing of a glove on it. I was still looking at it when she entered.

"You like the *Autocrat*?" I asked.

"I just love him; he's a dear. But I don't understand this." She turned the cover and pointed to the label. "Looks like a bookmark," she added.

"Is this your book?"

"As a matter of fact it's John's. I put it in my bag just as I was leaving."

"Ever see it before?"

"Frequently, in several of his books."

"But you have no idea what it means?"

"No, have you?"

"It's a secret between John, Albert and me. We call it 'The Sign of the Glove.' As you know, we three have had a few adventures together." She nodded. "And been in a few tight places."

"I should say so." A decided reproof in this.

"It was John's idea, suggested by my name, *gant*, a glove, and has proved useful more than once in following up a clue." I picked up the long gloves which she had thrown on the table and raised them to my face. "In suspicious company," I continued, "if John or Albert saw that action, each would read it as meaning, 'Be careful; danger'."

"Why," she said, "it sounds almost eerie."

"A thing of the past, my dear."

"One never knows, especially with a man like you. Better give me a few as a stand-by. Even I may

want them some day. And to think John never told me. That was real mean of him."

"I wonder where he is now?"

"Goodness only knows. I should be scared to death about him if he hadn't Edna to keep him out of trouble. You don't know what a worry that boy has been to me."

The next few days passed joyously for both of us. Captain Asterley had made no further request for an interview, and by the end of the week we had forgotten all about him. Though the object of his visit might be more or less apparent, having lamentably failed in it he had evidently abandoned a continuance of endeavour.

Meanwhile the great day of days drew near when Julia and I were to link up for better or for worse. Personally I had not the least doubt which it would be, nor do I think had she. Although we had decided on a quiet wedding it did not look, judging from the presents that were showered upon her, as though we were to achieve our purpose. She laughed at it all and said she would be glad when it was over. We both wanted to get away all by ourselves, visualized days and nights by blue waters, and dreamt a multitude of sweet dreams.

Then it happened!

CHAPTER IX

GONE !

ON Monday, when I finally awoke after a restless night, I said to myself, "Only two more days!" and was thrilled at the thought. Two days! It didn't seem possible; I could scarcely credit it. And then, she and I together. We should be away for six weeks, six months, or six years! Time was of no consequence. Perhaps while we lingered by the shores of the Mediterranean or the Adriatic, the *Manhattan* would one day appear with Wally and Edna on board. I could imagine the delight of such a meeting. Then we should probably steam away for the Syrian Sea and Palestine. Julia was frightfully keen on going there, chiefly, I think, on account of the fact that I had been through the campaign. She particularly wished to see Gaza, not through any romantic association with Samson and the Philistines, but because I had got one in the leg there. Perhaps I would be able to show her the very sandhill behind which Albert had carried me. I smiled doubtfully, but promised to try.

"Only two days more, Albert," I announced as that worthy appeared with my early cup of tea.

"Yes, sir."

"Don't you think it's wonderful?"

He said he did, but though his manner lacked enthusiasm I understood. He thought, despite my assurance to the contrary, that this marriage would sever our long and intimate association. Once a man took to himself a wife he could never be the same again. New ties, new interests, a whole world of change. A wife would come before everything and everybody. Julia and I laughed over his fears, for she was almost as proud and as fond of him as I was.

"Why," she said, "we've got him for keeps. If we slackened for a second John would snap him up in a flash. He thinks he's the greatest guy ever."

"And Elsie?"

"She just kills me talking about him. She thinks he's too English for words. I guess you know what that means?"

"They seem to get on all right."

"Extremes. She began by thinking him a glum old bear, and now she doesn't seem to notice his glumness overmuch. Odd how we change, isn't it?" This with a sly look at me.

"Luckily."

"Leathermouth," she cooed.

"Darling!" I protested.

"Isn't it wonderful!"

"You are."

"No, my dear, I'm not at all wonderful. I'm just a woman who's going to do all she can to make her man happy."

That afternoon we lunched together as usual, and afterwards strolled back to the hotel, where I left her, promising to be round in good time for dinner. But when I arrived I was met by Elsie who informed

me that her mistress had not yet returned. I smiled to myself. These women, they were all alike. But as the time passed I failed to smile, and began to grow nervous, anxious. Where had she gone ? Elsie didn't know ; Miss Wallington hadn't told her. She only knew that on returning from lunch her mistress had gone to lie down for an hour. Then she dressed herself and went out. Did she order the car ? No, she said she wouldn't need it.

It was now past eight o'clock, with my anxiety increasing. Frequently I opened the door and looked along the corridor hoping to see her come smiling and apologetic. At nine o'clock I descended to the office and made inquiries. The man thought he had seen Miss Wallington go out, but could not be sure. Perhaps the porter ? He had the man brought in, but he had not come on duty till eight. The day-porter would not return till the morning.

I rejoined Elsie, who greeted me with an anxious look of inquiry. I nodded "nothing doing."

"Gracious," she said, "what can have happened ? Perhaps she's been run down ? "

I was thinking the same thing and rang up one hospital after another, but no one answering her description had been brought in. I thought of George and his police, but though I rang up his office I did not expect to find him there at that time of the night. Nor was he. Next, growing more desperate every moment, I rang up his private address, which was in Regent's Park. Yes, a woman's voice answered, Mr. Mayford was at home. What name, please ? I told her. In a few moments his voice reached me.

"Hullo! What's the matter now?"

"Julia's missing!"

"Missing!"

"Yes. Come along at once, like a good chap. I'm in her suite at the May Fair."

"I'll be with you as soon as a taxi can get me there."

I tried to smoke. I even picked up the *Autocrat*—and saw the Sign of the Glove! It gave me a start for which I could not wholly account. Staring at it my brain began to conceive all sorts of happenings. Past episodes with which that sign was connected flashed through my mind. It had always meant trouble. I was still thinking of it when George entered. The clock on the mantelpiece was striking ten.

"What's this?" he began. In a few words I explained the situation, and also what I had done.

"Yes, that's all right as far as it goes. Evidently no accident. But may she not be staying on with some of her friends?"

I told him that was impossible. Had she been so detained she would have rung up. There could be no possible doubt of this. He seemed to think so too, and began to look uncommonly serious. No jokes now, no clumsy attempts at facetiousness. The official side of him was shown, and it was extremely business-like. He questioned me as to what had happened that day, almost as though I were a strange witness, and then interrogated the trembling Elsie. But she could only repeat in a quivering voice what she had already told me.

"H'm," he muttered, his glance meeting mine.

"It may turn out all right. Anyway, I'll run round to the Yard and set the wires humming. I suppose no publicity if we can avoid it?"

"What do you think?"

I admit that for the first time in my life I was really humbled in his presence, and realized what was meant by an inferiority complex.

"Well, not yet; we'll see what happens. I'll be back again within the hour if she doesn't turn up; if she does ring through."

How slowly the dreadful minutes crept. Elsie's talk ceased to flow but not her tears. She sat in a corner of the sofa and sighed and sobbed her heart out. She was sure that her mistress had been murdered or kidnapped. Rich people in America, so she informed me, were often spirited away and held to ransom. She was sure—of a hundred things that set me wondering, but not one that terrified me so greatly as that word "kidnapped." Yet how could such a thing be possible in the circumstances, and who would dare attempt it? It was absurd, or so I tried to assure myself, but would not say that I succeeded too convincingly.

Nor could I prevail on her to go to bed. She flared indignantly at the suggestion. Go to bed, sleep! She declared she would never sleep again. Though I needed consolation I tried to console. But it was heavy collar-work. She was sure her mistress had been spirited away and murdered for her jewels. The pearl necklace she wore was worth thousands of dollars. Thieves, knowing who she was, had followed her and seized their opportunity.

She was still sobfully lamenting when George May-

ford returned. He looked extremely serious and nodded for me to send the girl away. Reluctantly she retired to an inner room.

"No information of any sort," he said. "Our men know nothing."

"But, good God, George—"

"Yes, I know. But there is still the hope that she may be staying with friends."

"Rule that out; it's not to be thought of. Nothing would have kept her away to-night if it was possible for her to come."

"Then that makes it look rather serious."

"You rule out accident?"

"Absolutely. I've been in touch with all the metropolitan stations, and no one answering to her description is reported."

"Then what do you think it means?"

"I don't know. Had she any enemies?"

"Not that I know of."

"But you have."

"My enemies—" I began.

"May automatically become hers. Mind, this is merely an idea; there may be nothing in it. I'm just trying to think of something that may give us a line. You see, she's had a good deal of publicity lately; envy breeds discontent, and discontent crime. Was she wearing jewels of any value when she went out?"

"Elsie says a pearl necklace worth thousands of dollars."

"Was she wearing it with you this afternoon?"

"No. A string of amber beads."

"But she puts on a valuable pearl necklace to go

out for an hour or so when the streets are getting dark."

"But it was only about five o'clock."

"Dark enough for anything. Now where could she have been going?"

"George, you drive me mad with these questions. The thing is, what are we to do?"

"Little now but wait and hope. It's still on the cards that she'll turn up safely. If she doesn't . . . Well, we've got to find her, that's all. We're in this together, old man; you know that."

"Yes, I know."

"What are you going to do with yourself?"

"Wait here, naturally."

"Then tell the girl to keep her mouth shut. I don't see that we can do any more at present. Ring me up if it's all right. Anyway, I'll see you in the morning. Oh, by the way, heard anything more of Mrs. Asterley?"

But he was smiling now. I thought I read a wider meaning in the question, and like a flash came the remembrance of Captain Asterley's visit, of which I immediately told him. His eyes narrowed under their jutting brows.

"That's rather remarkable—if he was killed in Persia. I wonder what it means? Complications manifold, Peter. There was no demand for money?"

"No."

"And he never came again. Now what could have been his real object in coming at all?"

"Obviously to cause a breach between us."

"And realizing the impossibility of that he abandoned the idea. From Julia's description of him you

have no doubt that he was the man you saw at lunch with Mrs. Asterley?"

"And later at the *Café Rivoli*."

"Seems to me," he said, "that unless this affair solves itself to-night we shall have to interview the lady in the morning."

Feeling that he was keeping something back, I asked him what it was. His reply was indirect. "I would have been more relieved if the man who calls himself Captain Asterley had asked for a second interview."

I, too, had experienced a similar feeling, but had dismissed it, believing that the man's first incursion had been nothing but an attempt to take soundings.

"And from that you gather . . ."

I was like a child in my eager questioning, in my helpless leaning on the stronger nature. This catastrophe, coming to me, had left me hopelessly despairing. That initiative which had so often stood me in good stead had suddenly become atrophied. I was like one manacled hand and foot, desperate, yet impotent. The fact that it was my case, that I was the victim, and that one by one all my dreams of happiness were slipping from me, not only deprived me of the power to stir myself, but even to think coherently. Never in all my life had I felt so incredibly useless. Had it been another's trouble . . . Being mine it left me clutching at every fugitive straw that floated by.

"Perhaps a little," he answered. "Our friend the enemy is probably low in funds. If blackmail won't answer there are other methods of extortion. Don't

forget Julia is a rich woman. Mention of the Wallington millions must have made many a starved mouth water."

This sent speculation buzzing afresh.

"That photograph of Jask?" I began.

"It's at the office."

"I should like to look at it again."

"It reminds you of someone?"

"Count Solini."

"A pretty kettle of fish," he said.

When he was gone I rang up Albert, who joined me within a few minutes. His eyes widened in amazement as he listened to the story. Gone, Miss Julia gone! It couldn't be; how could it be; what could be the meaning of it? Swiftly I told him of my meeting with Mrs. Asterley, of the visit of her alleged husband, and incidentally of Doctor Lal and the person I was now inclined to identify as Jask.

"And of course, sir, you think they've had a hand in it?"

"How can I say?"

"You got in touch with Mr. Mayford?"

"He's been here."

He looked at the clock and muttered. "A quarter to twelve. Not late as they reckon time nowadays. We'll wait another quarter of an hour and then get to work. If she's lost, sir, we've got to find her, and that's all there is to it."

Here Elsie reappeared staring at us with swollen eyes. Going across to her he took her hands and began to pat them.

"Don't cry, kid," I heard him say in a lowered tone. And then louder, probably for my benefit,

"Now then, none of that. Buck up! We'll bring her back all right. Don't you worry."

But this, instead of soothing as intended, brought on a wilder fit of sobbing. Desperately she clung to him, burying her face against his breast. Hopelessly he looked at me.

"Can't we get her off to bed, sir?"

"No you can't," she cried, suddenly flaring up; "I'll never go to bed again! Why don't you do somethin', quick, instead of standin' starin' at me, you great big sap!"

Leaving Albert to soothe her as best he might, I once more descended to the hall and hung about for another half-hour. I think I should have gone mad had I not known that everything possible was being done. Until the morning, at least, the matter must rest in the hands of the police.

When I returned I found Albert alone. Apparently he had prevailed on the hysterical Elsie to retire. His face was grave.

"Though I don't like it, sir, it don't mean that we're beat by a long chalk. And, after all, it mightn't be as bad as we think, and even if it is we'll pull it off just the same."

I gave him my hand. We shook and looked at each other. There was no need of words.

I sent him back to Cork Street in case a message came through, though I really never expected one. But it was a wearisome vigil waiting for the step that never came. Elsie had sobbed herself to sleep on the sofa in Julia's room, for which I was devoutly thankful. At intervals Albert and I communicated over the wire, but to little purpose. The hoped for

message never came, and gradually I resigned myself to the inevitable. I smoked till my brain reeled. Nervously, hour after hour, I paced the room, waiting, listening. Occasionally I took a peep at Elsie. She was still sleeping soundly.

Though in my time I had received many blows from fortune none had ever been like this. Inaction, combined with the knowledge of my impotence, drove me mad. The primitive savage which is in all of us raged fiercely. Never had I known such thoughts of vengeance. If any harm came to her . . . But what was the good of it all ? Realizing this I tried to control emotion.

Daylight began slowly to break. I watched it, gladness mingled with despair. The police had not communicated ; therefore there was nothing to communicate. But the day meant action, an end to this terrible vigil.

At six o'clock I woke up Elsie. She started to her feet with wide staring eyes.

" She has come ? "

" No."

" And I have been asleep," she said reproachfully.

" Don't worry about that. Now listen. I'm going back to my rooms to change. You'll stay here and carry on as though nothing had happened. I don't want the staff to know anything. Get me ? "

" Sure."

" Things may not be as bad as they look, and Miss Julia may return at any moment. Anyway, we're getting a move-on at once. If you receive a visit from the police, don't get scared and think the worst.

And above all, don't talk, or we shall get this in the papers before we know where we are."

Returning to my rooms I met Albert's inquiring look with a shake of the head, and after going through the necessary routine of shaving and dressing I rang up George.

"I shall be at the office by nine sharp," he said.

I looked at Albert, and almost smiled at the grim sternness of his face.

"Well, old friend, it doesn't look much like the quiet life for us after all."

"That'll be all right, sir. We've never failed yet, an' we're not going to now. Pity Mr. Wally isn't with us."

I thought so too, but Wally was far away, and I was rather glad of it. What would he think of my guardianship of his sister?

George was waiting for me though I was sharp on the stroke of nine. His manner betrayed an unaccustomed seriousness.

"Of course there's no news?"

"No."

"Then have another look at this," he said, taking Jask's photograph from a drawer in his desk.

I studied it intently, placing my hand over the beard. Though the manner in which the hair grew was undoubtedly familiar, I could not reconcile the defiant, eager look of the photograph with the heavy face and slumberous eyes of Count Solini. This I explained, or tried to explain. George suggested that the fierce attitude might be a theatrical pose. As a dangerous revolutionary the fellow would naturally try to look the part. Had the photograph

been in profile instead of full face I could have answered without demur ; for there could have been no mistaking the backward trend of the head. At the same time I was inwardly convinced that I was looking at the man who called himself Count Solini.

" And you're probably right," George said. " You see, the pieces more or less fit. Jask is in England all right, and possibly in low water owing to the defection of Moscow in the matter of supplies. I know some foreign agent has been among our people in the East End trying to stir up trouble ; but he's as slippery as an eel, and so far has managed to elude us. But without money the danger from him is negligible. Now I think we'd better call on Mrs. Asterley. She may be able to help us a little."

" You think she is one of those ' pieces ' you mentioned ? "

" So do you." I admitted as much. " Lal is another, and the proprietor of the Café Rivoli is a Russian Jew who calls himself Karinsky. Our charming Anna has strange friends. We'll question her about them."

" If she's what we both believe, is it likely that she'll wait for us to call ? "

" If she's what I believe, it's just what she will do. But as a matter of fact she's still there. I've had a man on duty all night, and he fails to report any movement on the part of the enemy. There is still, however, the action of the alleged husband to be explained. To him Julia would mean dollars, of which it is highly probable he is in great need. Yet he never mentioned money, and that's the puzzling part of the whole business. Nor does he come a second time. Now, why not ? Afraid ? There's

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that, of course ; but that sort of fear never yet deterred the blackmailer."

" We are assuming now that these people are responsible . . . "

" We must. Who else is it likely to be ? That's why we're going to make an early morning call on the charming Mrs. Asterley."

CHAPTER X

THE HUNT BEGINS

A TAXI soon whirled us to Knightsbridge. Reaching the fourth floor of the building I took the lead, knowing the way only too well. There being no answer to my ring I applied the knocker, not too gently. Still no movement from within. I looked at George, who was frowning impatiently. He nodded towards the knocker. This time my rapping was loud enough to alarm the whole floor, and almost instantly the door was opened by the lady herself. She was in dressing-gown and slippers, and had apparently tumbled hurriedly out of bed.

"Oh, it's you!" she said, her full lips pouting angrily. "What do you mean by making a noise like this?"

"A thousand apologies. May we come in?"

"Certainly not!" She tried to slam the door on us, but my foot was in the way.

"How dare you!" she began. All the same, she gave way to my pressure on the door. I entered, George following. He closed the door. Furious the look she flung at him.

"My friend, Mr. Mayford—of Scotland Yard."

If I had expected this announcement to bring about

a collapse, or any sign of one, I was grievously disappointed.

"Does that excuse this impertinence?"

"Partly. Is Captain Asterley at home?" I asked.

"No, he isn't!"

"Still dead—in Persia?"

She looked as though she could have struck me. The brown-tipped eyes grew ominously threatening.

"We are anxious to ask him a question or two respecting a certain visit to the May Fair Hotel," George purred in his most disarming tone.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Let me explain," he continued in the same even, ingratiating manner. "If Captain Asterley died in Persia he cannot possibly be in London. Therefore someone must be masquerading in his name."

"Very clever," she sneered.

"Not at all; just a trifle confusing. We hoped you might be able to explain the discrepancy."

"Optimistic."

"Naturally, seeing it might prove to your advantage."

"Possibly I shall be able to maintain that advantage."

"Exceedingly doubtful," he replied. "You suspect that we are not unacquainted with certain incidents concerning your stay in India."

"And you seem to forget that we are not in India now, that this place is mine, and that I have no wish to continue this discussion."

"It might be better for you."

"And rid yourself of the idea that you can frighten me. Now get out, you and this dirty police spy."

Had I been of the withering type I should have perished under the contemptuous fury of her look. Up went her head and out came her chin, portentously aggressive. As we were still in the hall she pointed to the door and moved as though to open it, but George's bulky frame intervened.

"Then we are to accept your statement that you know nothing of your *husband's* visit to Miss Wallington?"

"I am not interested in the person you name, nor you either."

"But I am getting interested in you, an increasing interest," he added meaningfully. "You realize that blackmail is regarded as a serious offence?"

Judging from her smile she found this singularly amusing. Every moment her confidence seemed to increase. She even smoothed and patted the hair about her ears.

"I detest heaviness," she said. "You bore me, and I really must request you to go. As you see, I am not dressed to receive such exalted company. You should have been more considerate."

"Captain Asterley might prove a useful deputy," he suggested.

She flamed. "Get out, the both of you!" But as we did not move she flung me a further vicious look. "So that's what you are, a rotten policeman, a dirty crawling spy!" Then she looked at George and laughed rather hysterically. "Imagine a man with a face like that thinking that any woman . . ." Louder she laughed, but not convincingly. George's jutting brows came out.

"We are anxious to interview Captain Asterley,"

he said sternly, "but not inclined to go as far as Persia to do it."

"I'm afraid you'll have to go much farther."

"If he should return—unexpectedly—tell him I shall be pleased to see him. He will know where to find me."

A momentary shadow of doubt crossed her eyes as she looked at him, and something more, something that suggested fear. For to the evil-doer he would seem rather a terrible portent. Not the man, for she would know how to handle him, but the power that loomed behind him, visualized by a vivid imagination.

However, it quickly passed. Her pouting lips curled contemptuously as she pushed by him and opened the door, which was slammed on us with rather unnecessary violence.

"A woman of spirit," he said. "I wonder if the noble captain was listening?"

"Or Teska?"

"Who's Teska?"

I told him, I had almost asked for the maid, but refrained from some discretionary impulse. Nevertheless I thought her absence interesting, though he appeared to think little of it, saying he would have preferred to find the mistress flown.

"She's a tough nut," he said, "that will want some cracking."

We crossed Hyde Park Corner and entered the Green Park still discussing the situation. The first covert had been drawn blank, of that there was no doubt. The vague hope which had urged us to interview the woman had vanished utterly. If she knew anything it would need more than terror of

the law to make her speak. And why should she know anything? What had we to connect her with Julia's disappearance but the visit of Captain Asterley to the May Fair?

I left him under the colonnade of the Ritz, crossed the road and walked down to the hotel. Elsie met me with an eager questioning look. I shook my head. Her eyes were swollen; she started sobbing afresh. I tried to console her, but it was a vain and feeble effort. She was convinced her mistress had been murdered; and when I assured her that this could not possibly be, though in the greatest of doubt myself, she fell back on her theory of ransom, with which I was more in sympathy. Indeed I had thought so from the first, and from that thought the real reason of Captain Asterley's visit made itself almost apparent. He wished to *identify* the intended victim!

There was hope in this, if faint. The next move was to find the man who called himself Captain Asterley, and this I had little doubt George's vast organization would ultimately do, though even then that might not mean much. We had nothing to go on but suspicion, and this the fellow would know. Interrogation would therefore have little terror for him.

Finding my efforts to console Elsie entirely futile I ultimately left her and made my way round to Cork Street. Albert met me with an eager look. I told him of the abortive visit to Knightsbridge.

"I don't like women in these things," he said; "they're too tricky."

"But we don't know that she's really in it."

"She's in it all right, sir, she an' her friends. They're after money, an' Miss Julia's got it, an' they're

out to touch a bit. They've kidnapped her all right." He paused suddenly, frowning. "There's only one person I'm really afraid of, an' it's that. Indian doctor."

I shuddered, remembering Cynthia Clanwell. Julia in the hands of that little monster might be reduced to utter passivity and death.

"But we're not going to let him get away with it," he continued. "With his black face he won't be able to hide long from Mr. Mayford, an' when we've got him we'll soon mop up the others."

"But don't you realize that all this is merely suspicion on our part?"

"What else have we ever acted on?" he asked. "We'll drop on something all right. Miss Julia knows the Sign. What a lucky thing you gave her some of the labels. She'll find a way of using them, an' we're going to search till we get a clue, an' when we do . . . You told Mr. Mayford?"

"Yes."

"Then there'll be some sharp eyes looking out for that Sign, an' between us it'll be a queer thing to me if we don't touch the spot pretty soon."

"If we only had an inkling of how it happened. She couldn't have gone far, and even if it had been later no one would have dared assault her in the lighted streets."

"No, sir; she was hustled into a car, she must have been. We've got to find the owner. That's why I'm going out now to have a look round."

When he was gone I rang up Tabbie and fortunately found him at home. Could he come round; I wanted to see him rather urgently? He answered that he

would be delighted. Hoped there was nothing wrong ? I would tell him when he arrived.

In he came a few minutes later looking very spruce, happy and handsome. Evidently the world was going well with him just then. And it was as I surmised. Cynthia was coming along famously, and her mother approved of the engagement. No, nothing had been seen or heard of Doctor Lal. Probably the little blighter, realizing that England might be dangerous, had scooted back to India.

" But here I am talking about myself," he said. " Sorry, old chap. You wanted to see me about something ? "

My first intention had been to tell him everything about Julia's disappearance, but now I hesitated. Could I trust him, that is, could I trust him not to talk ? Though I had no doubt of his honour I was not sure of his tongue. Hitherto I had always regarded him as a good-natured, irresponsible scatter-brain, a fast and foolish member of the smart contingent about town, harmful only to himself. Would he be able to carry such a secret ? Possibly, if I put him on his honour, but was it at present necessary to go so far ? After all, twenty-four hours had not yet elapsed since the disappearance. There was still hope, though fainter than a shadow. So I asked him instead if he remembered Count Solini.

" That bounder," he answered, " I should think so." And then a little anxiously, " Has she been . . . "

" No." He looked relieved. " But I'm rather anxious to meet the Count again."

" I haven't the least idea where he is. I've never seen him since that night."

"Would you do me a favour, Tabbie?"

"Good Lord, of course I would. Only for you Cynthia . . ."

"Then if you've nothing better on would you show me round a few of the night clubs?"

He grinned. "Not having a fling before the knot is tied?"

"No; I'm anxious to meet the Count, and as you know I'm quite unsophisticated in these matters."

"To tell you the truth, I've cut out all that sort of nonsense, but seeing it's you, Gantian . . ."

"And that my purpose is quite innocent," I smiled.

"My dear old chap, you must think me an awful rotter!"

"Then that's settled? We'll begin to-night."

"Righto! But what about a bit of grub first?"

Here I begged to be excused, pleading a prior engagement. And so I had, with myself. To eat with Tabbie and listen to his prattle was inconceivable. I could almost as graciously have tolerated Woodward, the club bore.

He left promising to meet me at the club between half-past ten and eleven, and I then turned my attention to the next move. I would lunch once more at the *Café Rivoli* and have another look at the "Russian Jew who called himself Karinsky."

As soon as I passed through the door of the restaurant I was greeted by Karinsky himself, smiling, urbane; a podgy figure in his ancient frock-coat. His black hair was thin on top, and vanity had trailed a thin wisp of it over the bald scalp. His eyes were dark and narrow, his nose not the hawk beak of his race, but thick and heavy at the end. At first glance

he might have been of almost any foreign nationality. But I was seeing things now in the light of a deeper knowledge.

He stopped before a table midway along the room, but seeing that the one I had previously occupied was vacant, I pointed to it telling him of my former visit, and adding with a smile that I should like to sample another pint of his excellent claret. At this his look grew enlightened.

"Ah, yes, I remember you now, sir. You found the wine to your liking?"

"And worthy of your recommendation."

"Luckily I have a few bottles left. It shall be as you desire."

"Thanks. And I hope you have still a little of that admirable old brandy?"

He smiled. "For those who appreciate."

Then he called to a waiter who took my order. Endeavouring to appear unconcerned I lit a cigarette, though I rarely smoke just before a meal, while to smoke during one is to me an abomination. But as a matter of fact nothing could have destroyed my palate just then, for I simply hadn't one. It seemed unbelievable that I had ever enjoyed eating and drinking, or that I ever should again.

While waiting for the food I watched the door intently, if surreptitiously. People came and went, persons of no interest. Once a man and a woman came down the stairs from the upper floor, but they were strangers. Karinsky brought the wine and honoured me by opening it himself. I invited him to drink. He appeared to appreciate my hospitality. As we pledged each other our eyes met. His shifted

under my glance ; his eyelids flickered. I smacked my lips. "Excellent," I said, "I knew I could not be mistaken."

But though he did not come near me again I was certain that he had not forgotten me. Ever as he moved about I saw his eyes glancing in my direction, and wondered if he could have a suspicion of my identity. Yet why should he? Clearly he could know nothing. Nor was he expecting important patrons. The door did not claim his attention as on the occasion of my first visit. He wandered freely among the tables, his antique frock-coat adding a ludicrous effect to his rotund person.

In a way my disappointment was not untempered by a certain sense of satisfaction. Had any member of the quartette appeared it might have caused a doubt which I had no wish to entertain. As it was it strengthened the conviction that none of them had any wish to be seen. Of course this was mere conjecture on my part, but on what else was the whole structure of my case built ?

In coming to the place I had also hoped that under the guise of my proposed hospitality I might have induced the man to talk, but quickly abandoned the idea, having no wish to arouse suspicion. After all, he might have no inkling of my identity, and I might in the near future find his café of some service.

Returning home I got in touch with George, but he had nothing noteworthy to communicate. His men were out, every one of them fully alive to the importance of the occasion. Naturally I thanked him, knowing that he was doing and would do his best. But hope was so overshadowed by despair that I

failed to perceive the faintest gleam of light. What was happening to my darling? Was she even alive? With her was blended thoughts of Cynthia Clanwell. What if she should be in the same hands, subjected to the same insidious cruelties? If it was the Wallington dollars they were after they should have her share, willingly have it, if they would only restore her to me. But I feared there was something more than dollars behind the manœuvre, something that savoured suspiciously of revenge.

Albert entered about nine o'clock. His leathery jaws were set and grim, and there was a hard angry light in his eyes that only came there when he was in a tight corner. His report was that he had been among the taxi-men making inquiries, but it had been like searching the sands of the seashore for a lost seed pearl. Nor had he happened on the Sign, or any indication of it. But that didn't mean we wouldn't come across it. Miss Julia was clever; she had her wits about her. Mr. Wally's sister wasn't going to be beat for the want of a little ingenuity. And when we did lay our hands on them . . . Fascinated, I watched the play of his fingers. Once I had seen them close round a Turk's neck.

"You look tired," I suggested.

"Not a bit, sir."

"All the same, go and get something to eat, and then run round and have a look at Elsie."

"She's in a great taking," he said.

"Inconsolable."

"Poor little kid. So far from home too. But what about you, sir?"

"I'm going on the prowl with Mr. Tabran."

"Mr. Tabran!" He seemed surprised. I nodded.
"Nothing dangerous," I assured him, "or I shouldn't dream of going without you."

Tabbie was patiently waiting for me in our old corner of the smoking-room, a cigar between his teeth and some bright liquid in a small glass on the table before him.

"Just got rid of Woodward," he fumed. "That chap's becoming a criminal offence."

I know I ought to have laughed, or at least smiled: Observing neither he grew serious.

"About Solini," he began in a low tone, "it's important?"

"May be."

"I shall be at the church to-morrow," he said after a short pause.

"It may not be to-morrow, Tabbie."

"I say, old chap," he began.

"A temporary hitch, but don't say anything about it now. Not my fault, or Miss Wallington's; just something unforeseen. When had we better be moving?"

"Whenever you like. We can sample the small fry first."

It would be impossible for me to say how many places we visited that night. It wasn't a particularly edifying pilgrimage. Perhaps I was too sick at heart to appreciate this curious killing of precious time, too far down in the deeps to glimpse any of the multitudinous rays of light which apparently shone on these people. One club after the other I entered with a hope which was shaded with apprehension. What

should I do with the man if I met him? I was not definite in this. If he proved to be Jask anything might happen, and one thing in particular: I would wrench Lal's whereabouts from him if I had to take him by the throat to do it.

But nothing came of our pilgrimage save an intolerable weariness of the spirit. Solini, or Jask, or whoever he was, was not encountered, and in the early hours of the morning we abandoned the hunt. Once I thought I saw Mrs. Asterley in her shimmering green. If she were present . . . But a closer inspection proved disappointing. Not that her presence would have helped much. A curl of those pouting lips and a mocking smile. George thought she was a nut that would need a deal of cracking, and I was one with him. It might have been easy enough to send her out of India, but she was at home now and could snap her fingers at orders of deportation.

CHAPTER XI

THE TAXI-DRIVER

AWAKE early the next morning I lay in bed staring up into the darkness. Had all gone well this would have been our wedding day, the day to which I had looked forward with such a whirl of emotion. The thought was maddening ; to lie there thinking of it was an ordeal beyond all bearing.

Getting out of bed I crossed to the window and pulled up the blind. What a morning ! The rain was coming down in sheets, and the air was sharp. Outside it was still dark as night. The lamps flickered dimly through the torrent. Not a soul was moving, not a light glimmering from any of the windows opposite. A dead city, and I felt like one of its most abandoned ghosts. Then, knowing that I was shivering, I wisely slipped on a dressing-gown. But the window and the misery outside fascinated me. Contrasting the horrible gloom with the sunshine I had imagined, I felt as though I could have taken fate by the throat and strangled it.

I was still staring out gloomily at the gloomy scene when I heard Albert speaking. " Heard you moving, sir, an' thought a cup of tea . . . "

" Thanks. Sorry if I woke you."

" But you didn't, sir. It was the rain."

"Well, bring another cup for yourself, and switch on the light."

"Thank you, sir."

He, too, was in dressing-gown and slippers, but his unshaven face looked heavy and formidable, and the usually firm lips were twitching. His eyes as they met mine across the small table held all the pity and the passion of a dumb animal.

"You know what day this is?"

"Yes, sir."

"Not quite what we looked forward to?"

"That'll come all right, sir, an' don't you believe it won't. Mr. Wally used to say that you'd come out on top of a volcano in eruption an' land soft somewhere on your feet."

"I wish he was here with us."

"Wouldn't he swear, unless Miss Edna's cured him of the habit. Gawd, sir, listen to the rain! It reminds me of what I used to read about when I was a boy, 'An' the heavens opened.' Another cup of tea, sir."

Later, when he brought in the morning paper, he held it before me saying in a strained voice, "Look at this, sir!"

The paper was the *Daily Mail*. His finger marked the place headed "Personal." Taking the sheet from him and looking closer I saw the following lines:

"Leather mouth and leather brains
Garner stubble for their pains."

I admit it gave me a start. Again and again I read it. Then I looked up at him. He was questioning. I nodded.

" You think it's meant for us, sir ? "

" Looks like it."

" A bit saucy ? "

Something more than saucy ; contemptuous. But how did they come to know my nickname ?

" We're up against it, Albert."

" Poetry too," he scoffed, as though that were an added insult.

" If we assume that this is meant for us it's not going to make things easier."

" Of course it's vague," he admitted ; " but that might have been done on purpose."

I thought so too. That the name had been split into two separate words was probably not without intent. Its meaning would be clear enough to the person for whom it was intended. The mystification of others was of no importance.

I sent him out for other papers and he quickly returned with a batch of them, *Times*, *Telegraph*, *Morning Post*, and it was in all of them. Nothing left to chance. The sender was evidently determined that his rhyming effort should not be missed. It was a wedding present I had not expected.

Leathermouth ! So they knew of *that*. But how ? Thought naturally flew to Jask and the East, though other matters nearer home might also have contributed to their knowledge. Yet how they came to know was of slight importance beside the fact that they did know.

Knowing George was an early riser I rang him up at his private address and told him of the incident.

" A moment," he said. " Hold on while I have a

look." I held on. "Are you there?" came his voice after a few moments of delay.

"Yes. What do you think of it?"

"Confounded cheek, but hopeful."

"Hopeful?"

"They've got you all right, and they're holding her. Buck up! I'll make inquiries as soon as I get down to the office and let you know the result. Our first gleam of light, Peter," he ended cheerily.

I confess I failed to see even a glimmer of that gleam. If the enemy was what I believed him to be, it was not light he intended to shed upon us but a deeper and more profound darkness.

Though I knew he wouldn't waste a moment, and was equally sure that he would not be able to add an extra gleam to that light of which he had spoken, the waiting was almost intolerable. And when at last his message came through it was nothing more than I had anticipated. The advertisement had been received in an envelope with a request for publication, payment in the form of a postal order being enclosed. And that apparently was all that was known about it.

Though far from satisfactory there was still a grain of comfort in the matter. If there was any meaning in that advertisement, apart from the obvious wish to confuse and annoy, I determined to read it in one way only. Julia was still alive, and though living might be fraught with dreadful consequences to her I must of necessity hope on.

That day Albert and I went once more on our travels. My wedding day! I kept thinking about it till I nearly went mad. I hope I am not one of the homicidal kind, but if ever a man had murder in

his heart I had it then. Never had I known a similar frenzy, or dreamt that the worst thrust of fate could rouse me to such a pitch of fury. Once catching a glimpse of my face in a street mirror it shocked me. Here was a man walking abroad with murder. Leathermouth! Steel mouth, granite mouth, murderous mouth!

In the evening Albert and I compared notes. He was still nosing among the taxi-men and chauffeurs. His theory now was that she had been whisked off in a taxi. It was an obsession with him to the detriment of all other theories. And that taxi would belong to the West End. She would not have ventured far from the hotel; there was really no necessity why she should. With which I was inclined to agree. Had she intended paying a visit before dinner I felt sure she would have told me. Therefore the supposition was that she had gone out on a sudden impulse.

"And because I favour the taxi theory," he said, "I keep nosing among them. My new view is, sir, that the private car is out of the question. Miss Julia would never have entered a strange one. Of course, if the porter had seen her drive off, he might have helped us a bit. But I work it out like this. Probably, when she left the hotel, she meant to walk to her destination, but seeing a cab hopped into it. Now that cab might have been crawling round for days waiting its chance. Or that's the way I see it, an' that's why I'd like you to come with me to a little pub I know in Shepherd Market. It's called the *Half-Moon*. Taxi-men and chauffeurs drop in at all hours an' gas about their wonderful driving, an' the

thousands of people they didn't kill, thanks to their cleverness."

"And is that all they talk about?"

"No, sir. Some of 'em are great politicians, an' mostly bolshies at that. You should hear the way they talk about their employers. Cut every decent throat they would if they got the chance, especially when egged on by a bloke called Binter. He's ripe enough to be in with Jask an' Doctor Lal."

Curiosity whetted, I agreed to accompany him. Nor had I any fear of discovery. In one respect, and I fear in one respect only, I likened myself to St. Paul: I could be all things to all men. Albert lent me one of his caps and a pair of leggings, and as the night was cold and wet a muffled-up greatcoat completed the uniform.

There were not more than two or three men in the bar of the *Half-Moon*, which reeked of smoke and beer. Albert swaggered in as though he owned the place, nodded to a ferrety-faced little fellow who sat with an empty glass in front of him, a cigarette dangling from his nether lip, his cap on the back of his head, and ordered, "Two Guinesses, please." While we were being served he turned to the little man, who was avidly watching us, and murmured casually, "Have one, Joe?" Joe was on his feet like a bird with a genial and generous, "Don't mind if I do." I was then introduced as Albert's pal Skinner, with the further information that I drove for old Maston of Grosvenor Square, who, by the way, was the duke of that name. "An' that's saying something," he added with a knowing wink. Joe said it was. Evidently he knew all about "old Maston."

There was a little recess in the bar with a cane-bottomed bench running round it, and to this we retired with our glasses. The two other men, having finished their liquor, departed with a cheery good night. We sat and smoked. A few nondescripts came and went after dispatching their drink. One or two lingered. I called for a second round, but though that also disappeared Joe was mute. Albert gave me a sly look and ordered a third. Joe began to look weak and watery-eyed.

And still no sign of the man for whom we waited. Would he never come? I was beginning to doubt the utility of this visit when the door swung open and two men entered. The first-comer was a pale, cadaverous, chinless youth with big bolting eyes and a long nose, from the end of which depended a shimmering bugle. But the other was a different specimen altogether; a heavy, dark, scowling fellow who looked positively enormous in his greatcoat. He swaggered up to the bar and demanded in a truculent tone a "double rum hot." From him I turned inquiringly to Albert and found that worthy quietly smoothing out his gloves. The Sign! So this was the redoubtable bolshie whom I had come especially to meet.

His steaming rum having been served to him, the fellow took a gulp, smacked his lips, wiped his black moustache with the back of an enormous red hand, and condescended to look our way. Albert nodded and smiled a greeting. Mr. Binter responded with a curt nod, then came across and sat down.

"Just having another," said the agreeable Albert; "join us?"

Mr. Binter said he would, and called for another

double 'rum. Albert remarked that it was a beastly night. Mr. Binter said that he had known worse. Then for the first time he appeared to notice my presence. Albert repeated the formula: pal of his, Skinner by name; drives for old Maston.

"Maston," repeated the man contemptuously; "that swine! How many Rolls-Royces does he run now?"

"Six," I responded promptly.

"Ho, does he! He'll be lucky if he's allowed to walk presently."

"He never walks anywhere," I replied, letting him see that I thought his remark extremely funny.

"He'll be glad to get the chance one of these days, if it's only to a gallows in Trafalgar Square. Finest site in Europe for such a show," he grinned; "an' think of the thousands that'll be able to see it free, gratis, an' for nothin'."

"Oh, come," I said, still pretending that I thought he was joking. He gulped a mouthful of the fiery liquid and glared.

"'Im and the likes of 'im," he continued; "an' I know what I'm talking about. Lords an' dukes an' bishops! Nice lot to ride rough-shod over decent people. You'll see something if they let you live long enough."

"P'raps they won't," I ventured.

"Not if they can 'elp it. Six Rolls-Royces for that putrefying mummy, an' thousands of us starving."

"You don't look much like it," said Albert, whose eyes were beginning to flatten ominously.

"I don't mean to in a land o' plenty, nor would you if you 'ad any guts. But the day of the people is

comin', comin' quick, an' don't you forget it. In Russia, now——”

“They don't seem to be having much of a time,” Albert remarked.

“They're all right, true patriots, sacrificin' themselves for the big idea.”

“An' what's that?”

“The forward march of the Red Army. They'll snap through Poland as though it was a sheet of paper, join up with their German comrades, smash France into a million pieces, an' then mop up this wobblin' mass of rottenness that calls itself the British Empire.”

“Won't be easy,” Albert suggested.

“Pie,” said the man. “It's crumblin' a'ready. O'ny wants a push to topple it over. Lords an' dukes an' bishops,” he snarled, “an' the louts of both sexes that chase the fox! I wonder 'ow they'll like it when the fox starts chasin' them?”

He swallowed the remainder of his rum, scowled fiercely at us as though we were of the hated upper class, and without further word lumbered out through the door.

There being no additional interest to detain us, we rose, said good night to the ferrety-faced Joe, whose eyes were now streaming copiously, and followed in the wake of the formidable bolshie.

“A nice lad,” I remarked.

“Scarcely keep my hands off him,” said Albert.

“Apparently a worthy disciple of our friend Jask.”

“An' there's lots more like him haunting the pubs spitting poison. An' though you would think a blusterin' fool like him would be easily seen through, there's always plenty of fools to listen. An' some of

them swallow the stuff too, an' then go home an' knock the missis about for the glory of the proletariat."

But I failed to see in what way Mr. Binter could be of service to us. That he was a rabid Socialist provided no proof of his being on intimate terms with Jask. Rather the contrary, in fact; for if he were he might have taken some pains to hide his revolutionary proclivities. Yet knowing that Albert was not one to waste his time or his intellect on ineffectualities, I could not dismiss Mr. Binter as easily as I might have wished. A crude ruffian undoubtedly, and one who, given the chance, would not boggle at a shadow.

Another horrible night, and a curious expectancy as the day broke, if this prolonged night could be called day. The rain still came down relentlessly, punctuated by fierce gusts of wind which rattled the windows and roared in the chimneys.

When the morning paper arrived I opened it with considerable apprehension. Was that first insertion likely to be followed by a second? In a way I expected it, and was not disappointed. My eyes immediately fastened on the following couplet:

"Faint and fainter grows the chance
Of the dancer in the dance."

Looking round I found Albert standing beside me and handed him the sheet. His brows contracted as he read and let the meaning sink in; but he was smiling rather grimly when he looked at me again.

"Not the first dance we've been led, sir, or seen the end of." Slowly he mumbled the rhyme to himself. "Some people are easily pleased. I wonder what they'll think when we begin dancing in earnest?"

But when were we to begin ; what hope was there of our ever beginning ? The enemy held all the positions ; with him lay the initiative. Having sprung one great surprise attack what was there to prevent another ? And pretty secure in his position he must have felt to launch these sneers at our impotence.

Shortly afterwards George rang up, but merely to inform me that he had seen the thing. He would ring again when he reached the office and let me know the latest, which turned out to be of no more importance than that the envelope which enclosed the advertisement bore the post-mark, "S.W.1. 2.15 p.m." I asked him to make inquiries concerning one Binter, a taxi-driver, which he promised immediately to do.

Another day of fruitless search. I tramped the streets till I was footsore and weary. It seemed to me that the skill of Jask, the man of many faces, had not been exaggerated. Convinced that he was at the head of the conspiracy, I credited him with all the honours. But it was both curious and ominous that no trace should be discovered of Lal with all George's smart young men on the prowl. One would have thought that a man with a black face could not easily be hidden in a white community. Yet it would appear that after he had vanished from his lodgings in Earls Court the night had swallowed him up. Mrs. Asterley was still in her flat at Knightsbridge, and came and went apparently unperturbed by the fact that she was shadowed. But one thing was observed : though she visited many places she fought shy of the Café Rivoli.

Of the man who had called himself her husband

nothing was known, and as I was the only one who could identify him he was allowed a greater measure of liberty than he deserved. One thing, however, was pretty certain : Mrs. Asterley had no gentlemen visitors. Nor had sight or sign of the woman Teska been observed ; a heavy-browed, hard-faced woman as I remembered her, who, though seen only for a moment or two, had left an indelible impression.

That night Albert and I again visited the public-house in Shepherd Market, but though we waited long and consumed beer and cigarettes Mr. Binter did not put in an appearance. Joe of the ferrety face and the watery eyes was there moistening his dry lips with the tip of his tongue in lieu of cheap beer, but in him we were not interested. He was a man of few words and the intellect of a petrol pump. He accepted Albert's invitation to a free gargle with singular avidity, but when my worthy colleague attempted to pump some information from him concerning the bolshevist Binter he found the tank had run dry.

Returning to Cork Street, having sent Albert round to console Elsie, a brief note awaited me from George in answer to my inquiry concerning Binter, whose Christian name proved to be Frederick, and who lodged in a street off the Harrow Road. It would seem that he was fully licensed to drive a cab, and that nothing was known against him. Did I want him watched ?

As a matter of fact I didn't, having no wish to curtail his liberty or the freedom of his opinions. If he was the man I took him to be, he would be wide awake to every movement of the police, and any

hopes I might entertain of him would automatically vanish. If anything useful were to come of association with him I thought Albert and I might be trusted to produce it.

And in this manner another dreary day passed. Luckily the weather had taken up a bit, which I hoped might prove of good augury. But then I was like a gambler at the tables of Monte Carlo who hugs to his breast every idle superstition.

That neither I, nor Albert, nor any of George's men had been able to discover a trace of the Sign was probably not so disconcerting as it might have been. If Julia were kept rigorously under surveillance it would follow that she could find no opportunity of using it. On the other hand, I could not know that she had carried any of the labels with her when she ventured out on that last fatal journey. True, I had only given her about a dozen of them, "for the fun of the thing," never dreaming that the gratification of her lightly uttered request might yet prove of inestimable value.

Little variety in the mornings now; all were alike, abominable, cold, dark, depressing. November had ended in wet and fog, and December was carrying on the awful work as if in a spirit of sheer malignity. Only two weeks to Christmas, I told myself. Christmas, the time of rejoicing, of peace on earth and good will to all men! And my heart was black with hatred, and my fingers itched to strangle.

Albert came in with a cup of tea and the open paper.

"More poetry," he said. "Looks to me as though they'd called in Shakespeare's ghost."

There it was, standing out as though determined not to escape detection. I read :

"Hope may flit from North to South,
But West is best for Leathermouth."

As I read this over it struck me that it might contain two meanings. Either there was a palpable threat in the word West, or it meant that the answer to the mystery might be sought in that direction. But were they daring enough to give such a clue ; or did they consider themselves so secure that they could trifle with the situation ? Though I clutched wildly at almost every straw I could not clutch at this one. The real meaning of the lines was too apparent.

"So they're seriously thinking of sending us West."

"Not the first to make that mistake, sir. Take more than them to send us down with the sun. Bluff, an' soppy at that. I'd like to hear Mr. Wally on it."

He loved to hear Wally declaim in choice Americanese interlarded with an astounding variety of impressive English oaths. It was only then that he fully realized the amazing magnificence of his native tongue.

"He might spare a word or two for us."

"Not easy to anticipate surprise attacks, sir," said the old soldier. "He'd understand. An' anyway," he added grimly, "I'd like to meet that poet. I think I could knock a little more reason into his rhyme."

At all events, there was now no pretence of ignorance on the part of the enemy. They knew more of me than I appreciated, and apparently were not im-

pressed. The name was no longer split in two. Had I been in doubt concerning the first communication this last would have banished it.

Mentioning the probable two meanings, Albert admitted that there might be something in it. Believing themselves secure it was just possible that in the taunt there was also a clue.¹ Vanity attacked indiscriminately, like any other disease. But the West, he conceded, was rather a tall order, and might mean a stretch of country from the West of London to Land's End,

However, we concentrated on the West End, he taking Soho, which he described as something more than a nest of undesirable aliens, I going farther afield. He rather fancied that attention to the Café Rivoli and its clientele might not prove unproductive, and was more than disappointed that our friend Binter and his cab had failed to approach it. He had a wholesome detestation of that taxi-driver, and if they ever met in anger it would prove a veritable clashing of giants.

That night, while he was away watching the Café Rivoli and its purlieus, I again strolled round to Shepherd Market in the hope of encountering Mr. Binter. Joe of the ferret face was there as usual, an empty glass before him, hoping someone would ask him to replenish it, which I did. I also provided him with a cigarette, though his manner of smoking it was positively revolting. But there was no getting anything out of him; he hadn't two ideas or two words. Just a soaker with watery eyes and a watery brain.

Disappointed, I was about to leave when the door

was suddenly opened and the man I had come in search of appeared. Glaring round the bar his eyes lighted on us. I nodded sweetly, and to my astonishment he grinned quite amicably and dropped into the vacant place beside me. Evidently he was in a good humour, though he failed to notice my companion, who apparently did not command much respect.

"Just 'avin' one," I said; "join us?"

"Rum," he replied promptly, "double. You know, Charlie." This to the barman, who apparently knew, for presently the liquor was served steaming hot.

"Let me see," said Mr. Binter looking hard at me with his ugly little black eyes, "you're the bloke what drives for old Maston?" I nodded. "Perisher!" he growled. Again I nodded, hoping he would not inquire too closely into the working of the duke's household. "Never mind; just wait. There's a good time coming for that lot. 'Ave another?"

I accepted. Joe was not asked. He looked pathetic. Preparing to pay for the drinks, Binter stuck a great red finger and thumb into the top pocket of his waistcoat and produced a crumpled ten-shilling note. This he straightened out with a snap of such violence that the paper came in two.

"Dirty, rotten stuff," he growled. "Got a bit of stamp-paper?" I said I hadn't. "H'm!" he muttered, and again began to explore his inner pockets. This time he produced a somewhat dilapidated note-case, and from it a small square of white paper on which was the *Sign of the Glove!*

I confess it needed all my restraint not to betray

myself. Fascinated I watched him as he licked the label and joined the two halves. He held out his handiwork for my approval.

"Neat?" he said.

"Rather. What's the design?"

"Looks to me like a glove."

"So it is. Well, I'm blowed!"

"Picked it up with a few others in my cab, an' slipped 'em into my pocket thinkin' they might come in 'andy."

"They 'ave," I agreed.

"Foreign bloke must 'ave dropped 'em. Looks like a trade mark." He held out the note as if admiring his handiwork, or his foresight.

"Foreign bloke?" I repeated.

"Yes. Seems to be in the glove line. Picked 'im up the other night in the Strand. German, I think 'e was, or something."

What should I do; how act? Whatever I did had to be done quickly.

"I suppose you pick up many queer characters at times?" I ventured.

"Yes, us taxi-men see a bit o' life," he grinned.

"An' drive to all sorts of queer places?"

"An' 'ave longer memories for addresses than some people think," he added with a cunning look.

"You might even remember where you drove that German?"

"Are you askin' me! Twenty-seven, Male Street, sure as you're alive."

"Think you could drive me there?"

"Ho!" he said, looking at me with sudden cunning, "what's the game?"

"It'll be worth a quid to you," I replied under my breath.

"Old Maston lost any silver lately?" he inquired.

"Never you mind. Will you?"

"Like a bird," he said. "But what about that quid?" I showed him the edges of a couple of one-pound notes. He smiled understandingly.

After dispatching our liquor we left the place together. His taxi was standing outside. While he went to start the engine I opened the door, and moved with it towards the back wheel, where I had noticed the number plate. In a flash I had stuffed one of my gloves behind it.

Remembering that reference to the West, I wondered if Male Street was in that direction, and was not really surprised to find that it was. Presently we passed through Notting Hill Gate and began the long descent on the other side, near the bottom of which we swung off to the right. After traversing a twisting street or two we pulled up. I got out and approached him. "'Ere," he whispered; "number twenty-seven."

"Sure?"

"As death. What about that quid?"

I gave it to him. Even if he had sold me a pup the day of reckoning would surely come.

It was a mean-looking street not too brightly lit, depressingly forlorn. And the rain had begun to fall again, softly, persistently. No gleam of light appeared in any of the windows of No. 27. Crossing the pavement I mounted the three steps to the door and peered for the number. There it was; 27 on a white enamel disc. I knocked, and presently a light flashed through the fanlight. Almost immedi-

ately after the door was opened by a thin old woman with straggling grey hair.

"Is the occupier at home?" I asked.

"Yes, sir," she wheezed. "Please come in."

As I entered the taxi moved off.

Closing the door behind me the woman said, "This way, sir," and began to lead the way down the passage, moving, I thought, with quite remarkable alacrity. But I had not followed her for more than half a dozen steps when the light suddenly went out, and I was instantly floored by a heavy blow which caught me behind the ear.

CHAPTER XII

ORDEAL BY WATER

RETURNING to consciousness, after I know not how long, with a head buzzing painfully, I found myself in utter darkness. I also knew, from my ineffectual efforts to move and the pain in my arms, that I was tightly bound. My back was against a solid substance of some sort, which I guessed to be a wall. As I rolled over in a futile effort to free myself I struck my head violently against it, which may have knocked a little sense into me if it did no more.

Sense ! Yet even now I could not believe myself entirely devoid of it. In the first place, I had known perfectly well that the adventure might not be without danger, but had no other alternative than to close with Binter's offer. There was neither time nor opportunity to warn Albert or the police, and I was so frenzied at the thought of getting in touch with Julia that even had reason called a pause I should have ignored it. In the second place, I was armed, and I knew that if the necessity arose I should not hesitate to shoot. Even a shot or two through a window would have aroused the street. A policeman would be somewhere in the neighbourhood, might even be passing at the moment. So, although

realizing that the unforeseen might occur, I had every faith in my preparedness to meet it; while even if stark tragedy had stared me in the face it could not have held me back.

That light going out suddenly placed me at a decided disadvantage. With my right hand I was struggling to pull the gun from my pocket when the blow came. Undoubtedly my luck was out, for such a blow delivered under similar conditions would not have found its mark once in a dozen times.

The question now was, how long were my captors going to leave me in darkness, and what were their ultimate intentions? That I was in the hands of those who had stolen Julia I hadn't the shadow of a doubt, nor had I little doubt of their identity. What they intended to do was quite another matter, though I believed it would all end eventually in a question of money. What else could they possibly want? They might even have inveigled me here to arrange terms.

Then of a sudden the light was switched on, and after the first involuntary blink or two I was enabled to take in my surroundings. As I had surmised, I was sitting against a wall. My arms were bound behind me, my ankles firmly knotted together. On my left was the mantelpiece; the light came from two globes on either side of it. The room itself appeared to be sparsely furnished. There was a well-worn square of carpet in the centre, a sofa, and two or three chairs. A gate-legged table had been pushed back against the sofa. This left a clear space between me and the door. Thick dark-red curtains were drawn over the one window.

I waited expectantly, but whoever had switched on the light seemed in no hurry to enter. I watched, waiting for the door to open, wondering which of my captors it would disclose. Lal, perhaps, of whom I had a wholesome terror. That little man with his soft voice, his quiet ways, his scientific knowledge! There was more danger from him than all the others put together.

But it was Solini who appeared, solid and apparently amiable. He stood in the doorway for a moment looking at me. Then, closing the door after him, he advanced into the middle of the room. There he stood without speaking, trifling with the lobes of his long ears, making no attempt to hide the smile that twisted his lower lip. Staring back at him I no longer doubted his identity.

He drew a chair within a few feet of me, sat down and nonchalantly lit a cigarette. His smile deepened.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

"Not very."

"Leathermouth belies his reputation for cleverness," he mocked.

"Even Leo Jask has his vulnerable points."

At this I thought he appeared a little surprised. Then he smiled curiously, enigmatically.

"We apparently know each other." I nodded. "Excellent; it will make things easier. If it were not that love blinds the wisest of us you might even prove to be a nuisance."

"You're not getting away with it as easily as all that, Leo Jask."

"You seem to like the name." Again he smiled complacently.

"It is not without interest."

"It never has been."

"To those who will know how to use certain information."

"Provided by you, Colonel Gantian?"

"Already provided by me. You didn't suppose I blundered blindly into this?"

"It would not be in keeping with your reputation. I admit my fallibility; you, it appears, have no such weakness. I envy you, Colonel, and am delighted to renew our acquaintance. May I ask to what I am indebted for the honour of this visit?"

"I thought you might know something of the disappearance of Miss Wallington."

"Your fiancée?"

"Exactly."

"One of America's Dollar Princesses. You are not entirely devoid of shrewdness," he sneered.

"Where is she?" I demanded.

"You are now assuming that I know. Your wedding-day that was to be, if I remember rightly, is past. A lamentable misadventure, Colonel; I sympathize. Another amazing instance of the relentless unforeseen contingency. Even I have found life full of unpleasant surprises. In that respect we are singularly alike. I can appreciate."

Knowing that he wished to sting I was determined to thwart him. Nothing was to be gained by giving way to anger. If he did nothing worse than taunt I was likely to suffer little injury. I smiled up into his leering face.

"You know, Jask, you were a very foolish fellow to choose such dangerous associates as Lal and the

charming Mrs. Asterley, not to mention a certain blundering taxi-driver, who is already in the hands of my friends."

He smiled. "As I and my associates are?"

"As you will be in a few minutes. You don't suppose—"

"I don't suppose anything of the kind. My dear Colonel, for a man of your reputed intelligence the bluff is singularly futile; I had hoped better from you. Yet I agree that Anna Asterley is charming, and that it was most unfortunate you should have failed to impress. However, these misadventures come to all of us in the world of woman, and in the long run few things really matter." He paused for a moment, looked in the direction of the window, and then turned to me again.

"Listen to the rain," he continued; "a deluge. This detestable climate depresses me beyond belief. Water, water," he mused, watching me through narrowed eyes. "Are you fond of it, my dear Colonel? Probably. That is gratifying, very gratifying."

I stared hard at him trying to guess what he meant by this, but he met the look with one of incomprehensible cunning. I saw now that the slumberous eyes of Count Solini were not those of the scheming, fiery revolutionary known as Leo Jask, and for the first time a sensation of real fear swept through me. This man was not alone master of me but master of himself.

"Well," I said, "let us get down to business. What ransom are you and your gang demanding?"

"You would negotiate, you would be generous with the Princess's dollars? But I am not quite

sure it is necessary that your presence should grace the transaction. You see, my dear Colonel, you are scarcely in a position to talk even if we were inclined to listen."

"There are others who will talk more bluntly."

"Ah, yes, it is always those others who are so impressive, but who will persist, quite inconclusively, in thundering from a distance." He looked at his watch. "How the time flies when one is agreeably entertained."

He rose, walked to the door and opened it. Two men immediately entered, both of whom I recognized. The first was the man who called himself Captain Asterley, the other was Doctor Lal. The former advanced regarding me with a curious cynical leer; the latter, as of old, appeared modestly unobtrusive.

"Ah, I see you recognize each other," said Jask. "Excellent! It will obviate the necessity of a tedious introduction."

Asterley, for so I must continue to call him, stared at me with a contemptuous cynical leer on his dark sallow face, and I frankly admit I must have looked a rather woebegone object in my degradation. But Lal now advanced closer, his great black eyes smouldering ominously.

"We meet under different conditions, Colonel Gantian," he began in that soft throaty accent of his.

"Not our last meeting, Doctor Lal."

"I think so. It would have been wiser of you to confine yourself to the accumulation of American dollars."

"Than bring the murderer of Sir Everard Clanwell to justice?"

The great eyes narrowed ; his purple lips twisted in an attempt to smile.

"I thought it was generally known how Sir Everard died."

"It is—now. You played a great game, Lal, with your pretended friendship, but overreached yourself when you soared to the affection and the fortune of Sir Everard's daughter."

"One hears excellent reports of her health," he said.

"Now that you are no longer her medical adviser."

"Then you admit I have a way with women ? "

"Had, Lal."

"You think it finished ? "

"I'm wondering what Captain Asterley thinks," I said, turning my attention to that worthy.

"By the look of him," he sneered, "that Colonel Gantian is an extremely clever fellow."

"I congratulate you on your resurrection, Captain. Were you long dead in Persia ? "

His hard face hardened. He came close and leant over me. I saw his hands clench and prepared for the blow ; but instead of striking me he put his foot under my legs and contemptuously turned me over. I looked up at him and smiled.

"What courage, Captain ! "

There was a vague hope with me that the more they talked the greater would be my advantage. If there was any truth in the statement that luck always turns, why should it not turn in my favour ? Though I failed to see what turn it could or would take, I was determined to hope on in spite of everything. So far, this was by no means the worst of many bad straits I had known.

He smiled enjoyably as he watched my efforts to regain a sitting posture. I must have looked like a trussed sheep, or something infinitely more contemptible.

"Difficult?" he scoffed.

"Just an effort to get a good look at you, Captain, so that I shall be quite sure of you when we meet again."

Jask, who had looked on smiling, here intervened once more.

"Probably our guest is a trifle bored, and would welcome a little variety in the entertainment?"

He looked at Asterley as he spoke, who nodded understandingly and at once left the room. Jask lit a fresh cigarette and looked at me as though he expected a question; but though I wondered what form of entertainment they were about to provide for my delectation, I refused to gratify him by an exhibition of curiosity.

As the door had been left open I distinctly heard steps approaching, shuffling, dragging steps, and presently Julia appeared, supported on either side by Asterley and the woman whom I knew as Teska. I called her name. She started, looked round the room with bewildered eyes, shrinking as her gaze encountered the forms of Lal and Jask. Then she found me, a curious, trussed-up bundle against the wall, and stared without recognition. She was thin and white as a ghost, and there was a vacant look in her eyes that made me shiver with apprehension.

"Julia," I called to her, "Julia—darling!"

The beautiful eyes opened wider; their vacancy fled. In a thrilling voice she called out, "Peter,

save me!" and would have come to me had she not been held back. For a few moments she struggled furiously, calling for me to help her, but was soon exhausted by the effort. She would have collapsed utterly had not those two held her up.

"Most affecting," said Jask, turning to the others with a smile.

I loosened my tongue on him, on them all. Heaven only knows what I said in my madness. They laughed; they laughed at my threats, at my futile efforts to free myself. And all the time Julia was moaning and calling to me, and crying bitterly. The agony of it! I wonder I kept my reason.

As Lal advanced to her she shrank back in terror, crying wildly, "Don't let him come near me, don't let him touch me!" and hid against the woman, shuddering.

He turned to me and smiled. "I think that even you, my dear Colonel, can no longer doubt that I have a way with women."

"You realize what this means?"

"Perfectly. But rest assured; as her medical adviser I promise you that she shall receive every attention."

He nodded for them to lead her away. I called out, "Courage! Friends are near. Don't let these curs frighten you!" and Heaven only knows what else in my agony. Again and again she called to me, and I strained madly to free myself, and cursed them and was laughed at, and the world seemed to spin round me in darkness.

As they dragged her away, struggling, she cried out again, "Peter, save me, save me!" And I

suddenly grew cold, and shuddered, and almost lost the power to think.

Not a word was spoken while Asterley was absent. Even his return did not break the silence. They stood looking at me, expectantly, I thought.

"Well, gentlemen," I said, "you've got the whip hand of us. I suppose you're after money? I'll agree to your terms whatever they are."

"Money is very necessary," responded Jask, "though your agreement is not. You have seen? Presently our Dollar Princess will be rendered more amenable to reason. Therefore we shall be able to negotiate without your aid, Colonel, though fully appreciating the generosity of your offer."

"You won't find it easy."

"The good things of this life are never easily acquired, but we are not without hope. As you know, my friend Lal has a way with women."

"And know this too," said Lal, his eyes blazing with sudden fanatical fury, "and may it do you a lot of good. I owe you something, and now I am about to repay. Already you have thrust yourself between me and my affairs, and I can no longer tolerate such interference. This is where you go out, my dear Colonel, never to return. The redoubtable Leathermouth has played his last card and lost. Such is the invariable fate of last cards. The Princess and her dollars need cause you no further concern. We will look after both."

"And you think you can get away with it?"

"Can you doubt? Is it possible that you require further proof of our power?"

"You haven't a dog's chance, Lal, you or your

friends. You're known, all of you, and even the night will not be able to hide that black face of yours."

At this taunt his eyes blazed afresh. He took a quick step forward and I really thought he was going to murder me outright, but he merely kicked me viciously and spat on me. Then, his passion seeming to vanish as quickly as it had come, he once more became the suave and apparently unemotional Oriental.

" You are going on a long journey, my dear Colonel," he said, " and I will give you something to think of on the way. Apart from your interference in my private affairs, I hate you as one of the hateful oppressors of my country. I have always hated your people, and all my life have worked for but one end—their destruction. That end is near at hand; everybody can see it but you self-sufficient fools. Continue in your self-sufficiency and your slobbering brotherhood of man; that is all we ask. Fair without and rotten within, that's what your boasted Empire is, and soon that rottenness will be apparent to the whole world. Having taught Caliban to speak you know what use he made of his tongue. The moral is obvious. Fools always work to their own undoing. And here, my dear Colonel, is another secret to help you on your long journey, though, I think, scarcely a secret to you. For a man of action your dilatoriness was most reprehensible, and only exceeded by your folly in venturing here. Still, having a remnant of intelligence left, I think you understand ? "

" Perfectly. You murdered Sir Everard Clanswell ! "

" As his friend and medical adviser I naturally did

all in my power to help him out of his many difficulties. It was time he went ; freedom has no use for tyrants. Self-sufficient, vain, dictatorial, what hope was there in such a man ? To him my people were so many dogs to be whipped to submission. On his tremendous shoulders he carried the burden of the British Empire, or so he thought. It was too much for one man ; compassion relieved him of it. Now he sleeps peacefully at the bottom of the Indian Ocean. It is well that he should find rest at last."

As I listened to his calm, cold-blooded recital I feared more than ever for my darling. In the power of such a wretch what hope was there for her ? First he would subdue her to his will, as he had Cynthia Clanwell, and then . . . And I was powerless to help, and other help seemed past praying for. No longer had I the slightest doubt of their intention to put me away ; the only question was how would they do it.

I again attempted to continue the argument, but evidently they had finished with talk. True, I might have shouted in the hope that someone passing would hear me, but quickly abandoned the idea. They would soon have stopped my shouting in a manner most unpleasant.

Watching them closely I saw by their looks and nods that they had decided to act. Jask and Asterley came across to me, caught me by the arms and jerked me to my feet. Lal opened the door and went out. I was swung round and dragged after him. Though there was no light in the hall the men found their way without difficulty. Where, or to what, they were dragging me I had no conception ; but presently they

let go, and I hurtled headforemost down a flight of stone steps. I thought every bone in my body must be broken; I was sure my head was bleeding.

Confused, I lay there in agony trying to collect my senses. Indistinctly I heard voices above me. Then a light was flashed down the steps, and presently into my face. Lal's throaty voice asked me if I was hurt. I did not reply. Contemptuously he turned me over with his foot. Yet it seemed to me that he opened a door, which fell back with a crash. In the silence that followed I distinctly heard the dripping of water. Water! I remember Jask asking me if I was fond of it!

More mystery. Suddenly I knew that Lal was loosening the cords about my legs. Why? What was the meaning of it?

"The ordeal by water, my dear Colonel," he was saying, "the ordeal by water."

As he spoke he rolled me over with sudden violence, and crumpled up I fell through darkness—*into water!*

Down I went, my mouth filling. I had a curious sensation of choking as I struck the bottom. But the shock of the cold douche must have driven the numbness from my legs, for I was immediately conscious of kicking desperately. This drove me to the surface, and my head violently against some hard substance, but not with sufficient force to deprive me of my senses. Being a fairly good swimmer I used my feet to advantage, and with the aid of the wall managed to stand upright. *The water was up to my neck!*

Afraid to move, for my arms were still bound, I stood there in the darkness, my back to the wall, and tried to think. And somewhere, in that horrible

darkness, the water was dripping, dripping slowly, and it was bitterly cold. I looked for a gleam of light but found none. I think I shouted ; I know I struggled to free my arms. Though I realized that the diabolical ingenuity of loosening my legs had been but to prolong my agony, I was glad of even this shadow of a respite from death. I was able to stand, and that was something to be thankful for.

Where was I ? I pressed my face against the wall. It felt rough, like brick or concrete. A cellar, a concrete cellar ! What else could it be ? And all the time came that drip, drip. This could only mean one thing ; the gradual rising of the water ! I could not tell how far above me was the roof. I tried to spring up and strike it with my head, but failed. Meanwhile the water grew colder and colder. I stamped, but was afraid to move for fear I should fall into some hole. Then gradually I put out one foot and felt, then the other. In this manner I worked my way round the four walls of my prison. Or at least I thought there were four walls, but could not be certain. Then I ventured more in the centre, but quickly retreated. *The floor sloped downwards !*

And all the time came that drip, drip, with terrifying and monotonous regularity. I knew the water was slowly rising, for whereas it had at first just covered my shoulders it was now half-way up my throat. Presently, unless I collapsed with cold and fatigue, it would reach my lips. I thought it smelt vilely, a thick, sickly, rotten smell as of putrefying matter.

I tried to visualize the construction of this watery prison. It was not round like a well ; for, confused as I was, I felt sure that I had encountered more than

one corner. A cellar of sorts, yet more of a pit, constructed for a special purpose ! Had it known other victims, or was I the first ? Even now was I the only occupant ? I strained my eyes ; I listened. The drip sounded feebler ; the water was rising, ever rising.

I ventured one foot forward and slipped. Down I went, my mouth filling with the vile stuff. Struggling to the surface I regained my feet with difficulty and stood gasping, staring at nothing. And it was then I realized that some other object was near me ; something that had obviously been disturbed by my splashing. I shrank back in horror from it, gradually edging away, but the thing *followed* ! I knew it was following ! Almost immediately after *another face touched mine* !

Already I had resigned myself to the inevitable ; the hope that had kept me up had long since vanished. My lower limbs were already paralysed with the cold ; nothing but reason remained to me, and that I knew was slowly perishing. Yet the horror caused by contact with that face had a curious effect. A momentary new energy seemed to run through me. Again I tried to free my arms. God, if I could only free them !

Then I tried to think how long I had been there. Vividly returned my meeting with Binter, the drive through the night, the knocking at the door, my entrance, and the blow. Odd that even now I should be thinking of it as a lucky blow. All was clear. Across the darkness I could see the mocking face of Jask, hear his cool, well-modulated voice. Mrs. Asterley, Mayford, Albert, Julia ! One after the other they passed before me, looking at me with strange eyes.

With an effort I pulled myself together, and realized that this was the end. I was now deadly cold, and knew it more than felt it. Nowhere a spark of heat but in the brain, and that was gradually growing numb. The water was now to my lips. I had to hold my chin up to prevent it running into my mouth. Even then it found its way into my ears.

Then a strange sensation came over me. I thought that I was already dead, dead and floating through a world of the most dazzling light. I no longer felt pain or cold; nothing but a curious vague sense of ease and contentment. And then all of a sudden the light went out.

CHAPTER XIII

AFTERWARDS

A STRANGE sensation was mine on awaking to consciousness. I thought the dazzling light I had last seen had come again, and that I was curiously warm and satisfied. Though my limbs were apparently useless there was a glow in them which carried a sense of content to the brain. Or so it seemed to me. I did not know where I was. Possibly I was dead. If so, death was rather a pleasant sensation.

And then I heard, or thought I heard, a voice saying, "Look, look! Thank God!" And it was a loved voice, a voice I had a vague recollection of yearning to hear before I died. Some liquid was forced through my lips, making me gasp. I spluttered and coughed and . . . and saw Albert looking down at me, or someone who had taken his shape.

"All right now, sir. That's better."

One arm was behind my head. With his free hand he was rubbing my chest and sides and crooning over me like a mother with a sick child. It seemed to me that a second person was massaging my legs.

Recollection, sweeping like a flood, imbued me with sudden strength. I sat up crying, "Julia, where is she? You have found her?"

His strong arms held me down. "Easy, sir, please."

But I was now fully conscious and repeated the question. Slowly he shook his head. "We have not been able to find her."

"You have searched?"

"Everywhere. They got away before we came. But we'll find her, sir, and them! I've got Binter."

What he meant exactly by this I neither knew nor cared to ask. The knowledge that they had escaped and taken Julia with them robbed me of all other thought. Then I heard Albert say, "Run up and get some more blankets." I was too exhausted and numbed to offer a protest, and I had a confident, if vague, feeling that whatever he did would be for the best.

The man returned and another blanket was wrapped round me.

Again I seemed to hear Albert speaking as in a dream. "He's all right now. Keep him warm. I'll be back in two shakes."

When I opened my eyes again a strange but friendly face was looking into mine. A few feet away a uniformed constable was standing.

"Where's Floyd?" I asked.

"Gone to your rooms to get some clothes, sir. He'll be back in a few minutes. Try a little more of this." He helped me to a few drops of the potent spirit. The effect was magical.

"A close shave," I said.

"Yes, sir."

"You are of the police?"

"Yes."

"They've got clean away?"

"I'm afraid so."

Then I remembered a certain horror, and told him of it.

"You mean a dead man?" I nodded. "Hear that?" he said, addressing the constable.

"Shall I have a look?" asked the man.

"Better wait for Floyd. He won't be long."

Gradually the life returned to my limbs, and when Albert eventually reappeared carrying a suitcase packed with a fresh outfit I was ready to get into it. While he was helping me to dress the others descended to search for the dead man, and by the time I was once more warmly clad they returned looking very serious. I interrogated the detective with a look.

"Quite right, sir. He's dead sure enough. Drowned."

"Recognize him?"

"No."

I don't know what instinct prompted the impulse, but I looked at Albert and nodded. Understanding, he disappeared. When he returned his face was grave and grim.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"Mr. Tabran."

"You are sure?"

"I wish I wasn't. He's in full evening dress."

The horror of it almost stunned me. That dreadful face that had brushed against mine! Tabbie gone, murdered! It seemed incredible. That cheery, careless young fellow who had known only the brightest side of life. To die like that!

Albert was speaking again. "If you're able, sir,

I think we'd better get a move-on. The police are in charge now. You come with us, Tom." This to the plain-clothes man.

Outside a taxi was standing, its engine running. I noticed another uniformed constable by the kerb as if on guard. Albert, after helping me in, again spoke. He seemed to have taken charge of the occasion. "You'd better get in front, Tom, and watch that swine." Doubtless Tom obeyed, for presently the cab shot off.

"All right, sir?" I told him that I was, though feeling far from right, for as a matter of fact I was beginning to shiver horribly. As if realizing this he handed me his flask. Then he chuckled. I wondered why. Presently he explained.

"This is Binter's cab."

"Binter's!"

"And he's driving us home."

"But—"

"Fact, sir. Tell you all about it later."

"What time is it?"

"Just on five."

When we arrived at Cork Street he insisted on putting me straight to bed, and realizing the wisdom of this I raised no objection. The shivering had increased, and I knew I dared not trifle with my health in such a crisis. Moreover, nothing further could be done at the moment. As he had said, the police now had the matter in hand.

And where was Julia with it all; what had happened to her? That cry of hers for help haunted me. Whenever I closed my eyes I saw her pallid, frightened face, the tears, the imploring gestures. Would they kill

her? Not yet, I told myself, not while there was a chance of getting money. She was too valuable to be killed—yet. But after, when they had robbed her . . . I knew from hints that were dropped—we never really discussed financial matters—that she had transferred a great part of her fortune to London. This, or the greater portion of it, might fall into their hands. Then they would scatter. But before scattering . . . I dared not think of it.

I must have dozed for an hour, perhaps longer, then woke up suddenly thinking I was choking. Albert was immediately beside me. I smiled up into his extremely serious face.

"I think I could do with a nice cup of tea."

He must have had the kettle on the boil and thin bread and butter ready. Never was there such a chap. After the tea, which refreshed me enormously, I called for a cigarette. He smiled and shook his head.

"Some people take a lot of killing, Albert."

"They do that, sir," he grinned.

"Especially when they have a pal like you." I stretched out my hand and grasped his. "Now tell me all about it."

"Well, sir, you remember I went out to have a look at the *Café Rivoli*?" I nodded. "I must have hung round for an hour or more, but seeing nothing that was likely to help us I came back here to report. You, of course, were out, and thinking you might have gone round to the *Half-Moon* I hoped to find you there. Luckily that boozer Joe was hanging round waiting for somebody to ask him to have one. From him I learned that you had been there, and that

you had gone away with Binter. Not promising, I thought, but something to go on with.

"Then who should blow in for a glass but Tom Gregory, one of Mr. Mayford's plain-clothes men, him that was with me to-night. Knowing he was on our job I got him to go with me in search of Binter. No, we didn't look up the cab ranks, or send out an S.O.S. I had his address all right; copied it from the note Mr. Mayford sent you. So we hopped into a taxi. Found his number easily enough, but was told by the landlady that he wasn't in. Where did he garage? In Shenwin Street, round the corner.

"It was a cheap sort of a run-up, but that didn't matter; what mattered was that Binter's taxi wasn't there. The youth in charge, a cock-eyed, big-mouthed, impudent lout who'll fall into Tom Gregory's hands one of these days, was not communicative. He didn't know anything, and he wasn't going to let us hang round his garage—until I took him by the scruff of the neck an' shook him. Then he caught up a spanner, an' I had to clout him alongside the ear before he'd drop it.

"Now I argued this way. If I'd done any dirty work that might mean trouble I'd try to cover it up as best I could, an' I reckoned that Binter would do the same. If he could prove that his cab was in the garage at a certain time it might help him in the way of an alibi. An' sure enough we hadn't been there more'n half an hour when in he comes. Soon as he got down from his perch I went an' stood in front of him.

"'Good evening, Binter,' I said. 'Where did you drive my pal Skinner?'

"Who's your pal Skinner?" he growled.
"Him that drives for the Duke of Maston."
"I don't know what you're talking about."
"'I want you to drive me there,' I said; 'quick.'
"He told me to go to hell, and turned away as though he couldn't be bothered. But I caught him by the shoulder an' swung him round. Up went his fists, an' he began to use language, so I caught him one an' over he went.

"That quieted him a bit, an' he looked on while Gregory and I searched his car for the Sign. Then he began to jeer, but that didn't matter. I knew if you had really been in that cab you would have left a clue, and naturally thought it would be somewhere *inside*."

I nodded. "He would have seen it."

"Sure. When I found your glove behind the number plate I flicked it in his face, an' I must say he looked rather funny.

"Now then," I said, "drive us at once where you drove my pal Skinner, an' be sharp about it. An' no tricks, Binter, unless you want to spend the night in the cells, with penal servitude or hanging in front of you. This is a police job, an' this is Detective Gregory."

"Then he climbed down, an' whined about having done nothing, an' that he couldn't remember where he had driven you. An' he might have got away with it, too; but luckily at that moment a passing policeman poked his nose in the garage, and Gregory hailed him. Then he knew that the game was up. It was no use trying any more hanky-panky. The law had got a grip on him. By the time we reached

Male Street, he was soft as a lamb. I doubt if he'd have tried to run away even if we hadn't left the copper in charge.

"Naturally there was no answer to my knock; but as you know, sir, I'm not a bad hand at opening doors."

He grinned. I nodded. Again I realized that when nature cast him in an honest mould she spoiled a first-class cracksmen.

"Gregory and I went in, flashing our torches. We soon found the switches an' turned on the lights, but of course discovered nothing but signs of a hurried flight. The only door that was locked was the one that led down to the cellar. This I thought looked suspicious, an' smashed it open. Then I saw the steps, an' . . . Well, I grabbed you. Now what about another cup of tea?"

And so he ended in this matter-of-fact way. But I frankly admit that I was almost choking. Again my hand sought his.

"And what became of Binter?" I asked.

"Oh, he's well looked after. Gregory was taking him round to Vine Street for the night."

Then I told him of how I had seen Julia, how she had appealed to me, and of my fears. His face hardened, his grim mouth shut like a steel trap. Yet he strove to play the comforter, though I knew that like me he was comfortless. He was sure that everything would turn out all right. Miss Julia had plenty of pluck, and they were only after her money. With much more of the same inconsolable consolation.

After I had dressed and breakfasted I felt little the worse physically for my adventure of the night.

Mentally I was in a whirl of confusion and despair. The terror in Julia's eyes haunted me. That pitiful cry for help echoed and re-echoed unceasingly. Though I cursed the impetuosity that had landed me in such a mess, I knew that I should probably do the same again in similar circumstances. My love for her had deprived me of calculation, foresight ; her rescue had become a blind obsession.

After I had rung up Elsie and given her the latest news, enjoining her still to preserve extremest caution in everything, I got on to Mayford at his private address and briefly told him what had happened. Doubtless, realizing from my tone the state I was in, he professed to think that things might be worse. Julia was alive ; they were after the dollars right enough, and he himself would examine Binter, who was likely to prove a valuable witness. Would I come along to his office at ten, and perhaps I had better bring Albert with me.

We arrived on the stroke. He rose from his desk and shook hands warmly.

"Just let me hear it over again," he said. "Not as hopeful as I thought," he admitted after I had repeated the story. "I never really believed it was anything worse than blackmail. Tabran, too ! Poor old chap ! Who would have believed it ! Lal must be a madman. Jask ! Well, he might do anything from what I know of him. But who's the other swine that calls himself Captain Asterley ? "

"But Julia !" I protested. What did anything else matter ?

"Safe, until they touch her dollars."

"Safe ! Good God, man ! "

"Yes, I know. But not a moment after. We've got to face that fact, Peter, and get going at top speed."

"But, George——"

"Yes, yes, old man, I'm one with you in everything. Perhaps Binter will be able to help us. We'll have him in."

He pressed a button on his desk and almost immediately a uniformed constable entered.

"Tell Detective Gregory I'm ready."

"Yes, sir."

The man vanished. Within a minute the detective entered ushering in his charge. I must confess that Binter's appearance surprised me exceedingly. Albert had casually mentioned that he had "caught" the fellow "one," but to me it appeared as though he had caught him a dozen, and all good at that. Binter's eyes were blackened and his mouth grotesquely swollen. In fact, I don't think I have ever seen such a mouth, with the exception of my own after a certain memorable occasion. The lower lip had been badly split and was still raw. That affair in the garage must have been rather formidable.

He entered scowling truculently and flung a glance from one to the other. Seeing Albert he started and glared furiously, and for the moment I thought he was going to rush him. But wiser counsels evidently prevailed, though the glitter in his eyes was unmistakable.

"Step forward," said George. Binter stood still glaring at him. "Did you hear me?"

"I wanna know what all this means," he growled, while not forgetting to obey.

"It will probably mean something extremely serious for you unless you're careful."

"But what 'ave I done? Why was I locked up all night an' treated as though I was a criminal? Let me tell ya, a good deal more is goin' to be 'eard about this."

"A good deal more," George repeated sternly; "and by the look of it not to your advantage—unless you own up."

"To what?"

"Come, come, none of that. What do you know about the people at 27, Male Street?"

"Nothin', s'elp me Gawd."

"You don't expect me to believe that?"

"I can't 'elp what you believe."

"And don't forget where you are. Now, then?"

"Whatya want me to say?"

"We'll begin with the foreigner you picked up in the Strand and drove to that address."

"That's all right. I drove 'im there just as I would any other fare."

"And remembered the address?"

"Some addresses stick, an' some don't."

"This one appears to have stuck?"

"Yes."

"It is just possible that you were not hearing it for the first time?"

"No, I never 'eard it before."

"But in some unaccountable way it stuck? Can you explain?"

"No, except that memory's a funny thing."

"Very. You know the *Half-Moon* in Shepherd Market?"

" Sometimes I drop in for one. Any objection ? " he added impudently.

" You had one there with this gentleman last night ? "

" Gentleman ! " he scoffed. " His name's Skinner ; he's chauffeur to the Duke of Maston. An' I don't know about 'avin' one with 'im. "

" As a matter of fact I think he had one with you. "

" Wish it 'ad choked 'im ! "

" A little later on you appear to have done your best in that direction. "

" I dunno whatya mean. "

" In paying for that drink you produced a ten-shilling note, which you, *accidentally*, tore in two. But luckily you discovered an adhesive slip with which you stuck the two parts together. Fortunate, wasn't it, that you had the slip on you ? "

" I see he's been tellin' you all about it. "

" You found that slip of paper, with several others, in your cab ? "

" The next morning. "

" Then how did you know they were dropped by the foreign gentleman ? "

" I didn't ; I on'y thought they mighta been. "

" Why ? "

" He was the last fare I drove that night. "

" And that's all you know about it ? "

" That's all. "

" Your memory doesn't seem to be working as well this morning as it did last night. "

" It's workin' all right, " he growled.

" You appear to have been in the wars. "

He flung a quick, vicious glance at Albert. "An' it's still good," he threatened.

"Then you know nothing about the people who lived at 27, Male Street?"

"What should I know of them?"

"Answer!"

"No!" he snapped.

"Interested in politics?" was the next question.

"What sensible man is who don't get nothin' out of it?"

"Are you quite sure you don't?"

"I don't 'appen to be in the swim."

"But you're in this business, Binter, up to your neck."

"I suppose it's all right if you say so."

"Quite. Know the Café Rivoli?"

He thought for a moment. "It's one of them places in Soho, ain't it?"

"Your memory works quite creditably upon occasion. Ever drive that foreign gentleman there?"

"I might 'ave; I dunno. The West End swarms with foreigners."

"Or a little Indian gentleman?"

"I don't know no Indian gentleman."

"Sure?"

Then he lost control. "Look 'ere, sir, what does all this mean? Why am I being badgered? What's the pleece got against me? Let me 'ave it straight so's I'll know 'ow to answer. 'Ere am I suddenly arrested, locked up for the night, an' now questioned as though I'd been murderin' somebody. It's interferin' with the liberty of the subject, that's what it is, an' I'm not standin' for it. Nice country this is when a man can't go about his lawful business without

bein' mucked up at every turn by a lot of busybodies. One of these days the pleece'll find the boot on the other foot, an' you can take it from me they won't 'arf like it."

Patiently George listened to this outburst; there was neither smile nor frown on his heavy face. Even the ginger eyebrows forgot to jut. But the eyes were steady and piercing, and looked intensely cold. Suddenly he nodded to Detective Gregory, who sharply tapped Binter on the shoulder. This caused an explosion of rage.

"I wanna know——" he began.

"Take him away," said George.

The detective caught him by the arm and roughly swung him round. He was dragged from the room protesting.

"Lying," said George.

"Obviously."

"You agree, Albert?"

"Yes, sir."

"It would be worth it, Peter?" I questioned him with a look. "Freedom—if he talks."

"Anything, George, promise him anything. Every moment is precious. Good God, man, don't you realize that even now . . ."

"I know. But he's a mule, and brutal. While he thinks we have no proof he'll prove a pretty tough proposition. And would he believe me—a policeman? I doubt it. They hate my kind by instinct. And you seem to have hurt his feelings, Albert, as well as his face."

"Well, sir, he wouldn't listen to reason, so what was I to do?"

"Exactly. Legally, as you know, I have no right to detain him, but in the interests of justice—" He paused and smiled. "On the other hand, we might let him go, unconditionally, and shadow his every movement." I suggested that this method hadn't worked too well in the case of Mrs. Asterley. "I agree," he admitted; "but in one case you have an educated woman immersed to the neck in intrigue, in the other a warped and blunted savage subject to fits of passion. You see, Albert, a policeman's life is not such a happy one after all."

"No, sir. An' there's one other point. He knows the Colonel's alive, but they don't. Mightn't it help a bit if they continued to think that he was dead?"

George beamed on him. "It might help a great deal. But there's Mr. Tabran, and the inquest."

"Couldn't you keep that back, sir?"

"Not indefinitely, I'm afraid."

"But 'in the interests of justice,' sir," quoted the wily one, "same as you do with Binter. It'll give us a breather anyway, an' time to look round. You remember what they said in the advertisement, sir. 'West is best for Leathermouth.' Well, it was, an' why shouldn't it be again?"

George flung an appreciative look at me from under his heavy brows.

"Do you know," he said, "I think there's something in that."

CHAPTER XIV

A WOMAN'S WAY

BUT unfortunately there were others who knew me besides the formidable trio I had last seen under such unhappy conditions. While interesting myself in the Clanwell affair, never dreaming that I should so soon become the victim, I had moved about with a freedom which I now found regrettable. Nor did I see how the fiction of my being dead could possibly be prolonged. The discovery of poor Hughie Tabran's body was in itself enough to create a sensation. Of that discovery they must soon learn, and would realize that every moment was fraught with incalculable danger to them. Therefore they would not hesitate to act in a manner likely to further their own advantage.

Jask and Asterley were clearly out for money. Both had evidently been accustomed to the handling of considerable sums, and finding themselves in danger of penury had not hesitated to replenish their coffers by the most daring and dangerous expedients. But Lal was in a different category. He was a real political fanatic, a genuine hater of England and all that she stood for. Under the guise of loyalty he had wormed his way into the confidence of the highest. Being powerless openly to flaunt authority, nothing was left

him but intrigue. For one who came from a long race of time-servers, men who had grown accustomed to the heavy heel and sharp sword of a succession of conquerors, he would experience little difficulty in bending the back and proffering lip service. And to deceive a powerful opponent by a series of strategic moves has ever been held a high intellectual achievement, especially in the art of war. And this would have been war to him, war in which the ultimate liberation of his country was the burning ideal.

But now to the broad national purpose to which he had dedicated his energies was added a personal note. It might be interesting to know his real feelings towards Cynthia Clanwell. Did he desire her as woman, or as a social gesture of infinite importance? That he merely wished to control her fortune I could not bring myself entirely to believe. To marry the daughter of a distinguished Indian official would be a remarkable triumph over convention, and to obtain that end he had not scrupled to employ the most outrageous means. Therefore to be thwarted almost in the hour of success would arouse a sense of injury and awake the most bitter feelings. In that thwarting Tabbie had been chiefly instrumental, and now he was dead; while I, who had also moved in this matter, had escaped his fate by a miracle. This, too, would be known sooner or later. Such intriguers would have spies everywhere. It would be impossible for me to remain hidden. Even now they were probably aware of my escape.

Out of that knowledge what awful calamity might not come? Knowing that retribution would probably follow swiftly on the heels of such misdeeds, would

they hesitate at further outrage? Compromised beyond all hope, what but the worst from them could one expect? Baffled, furious, would they spend their spite on Julia? I turned sick at the thought. Imagination evoked a succession of horrors. That Lal would with devilish ingenuity ultimately subject her to his will I had never a doubt. The case of the Clanwells was too apparent and too close for me to think otherwise. Her chance and mine lay in the powerful appeal for money. Lal would know that the rope was already round his neck, and doubtless act accordingly. But he was not alone in this matter. Those others would want money before all things, and I believed they would still try to get it. That purpose achieved there would be no further hesitation.

Albert and I were a gloomily silent pair as we walked away from Mayford's office. We knew that he would do everything in his power; that his men, as far as in them lay, would concentrate with energy and intelligence on the matter in hand. But I'm afraid that neither of us had an abundant faith in police methods. This was no ordinary combing of criminal haunts, nor were these men ordinary criminals. Nor was it an English mentality with which they had to cope. With the exception of Captain Asterley these men were aliens, and would think and behave in a manner strangely perverse. Besides, every hour was priceless.

Entirely at a loss what to do or which way to turn, I even pondered the advisability of calling on Mrs. Asterley and intreating her intercession. If it was money she was after she could name her terms, and

no questions asked. I could promise her a good deal, money, liberty, freedom to leave the country, and knew with George's aid that I could fulfil the promise. Would she listen ; dared she ? Though her detestation of me might be extreme, would she let it stand in the way of self-aggrandisement ? They say every man has his price, which incidentally includes every woman. That she was beyond price was open to doubt. Was her cupidity impervious to temptation ?

I mentioned the matter to Albert and received the expected reply. Had I forgotten that I was presumed dead ? I explained that I didn't think much of the presumption, nor do I really believe did he. Yet from all accounts Mrs. Asterley, so he said, appeared to be a tough nut, though he added with his accustomed sagacity that all nuts were made to be cracked. If she was hard up, and desperate, there might be a chance. And she might not yet know of what had happened in Male Street.

So we directed our steps towards Knightsbridge, mounted to her flat, knocked on the door, which presently was opened by the lady herself. Seeing me she stiffened, but this time did not attempt to shut me out. Instead, she frigidly demanded my business.

"I've come to talk to you," I said.

"I've nothing to talk to you about."

"I think you have, and that it might be to your advantage to listen."

"More police-spying ?" she sneered.

"I come as ambassador," I said, "but not from the police. This is a matter which concerns only you

and me, and one other who is not of the police. But the doormat is not the place to discuss it."

Mockingly she bowed for us to enter and then closed the door. Scornfully she looked Albert up and down.

"Precisely, Mrs. Asterley. This is a matter for us two. My friend will wait here."

She led the way into the sitting-room. A dull day and a dull cold room, I thought, rather different from that first night of our meeting, when poor Tabbie was the only sullen member of the company. I had called her the charming Mrs. Asterley, but in the dull light of that December day she no longer struck me as charming. Her face was pallid, her pouting lips pale, and in the brown-tipped grey-blue eyes there was a strained, anxious look.

"Well," she began, "what do you want this time? Am I never to be rid of you?"

"On the contrary I have come to you for the last time."

"That's something to be thankful for."

"But there's a condition."

Her lip curled. "I thought so."

"My fiancée is missing, Mrs. Asterley."

"The American woman with the dollars," she sneered.

"Quite a large number of those dollars, coupled with not a few English pounds, are waiting to be transferred to your account, and no questions asked."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"There is, however, one condition."

"That makes two," she mocked.

"Miss Wallington must be restored to me at once. Do that and name your own terms."

"Generous, but vague. What are you trying to tell me?"

"Isn't it quite clear? Restore, or be the means of restoring, the lady I have mentioned, and this espionage shall cease, and you shall be at liberty to come and go without molestation of any kind."

"Are you quite mad? What do I know about Miss Wallington?"

"You forget that you sent your husband to interview her."

"That's a lie!"

"Anyway, we'll let it pass. Is it also a lie that you know Jask, who calls himself Solini?"

A curious, quick smile crossed her face. "I know Solini," she said.

"And Doctor Lal?"

"Well?"

"Miss Wallington is in the hands of these men."

"Ridiculous!"

"Get her out of their hands and I'll make you a rich woman, and free."

"What do you suppose I am?" she asked with a fair assumption of indignation.

"A very charming woman, in your mood."

"Thank you," she sneered.

"But you are trifling with danger, and I warn you carefully to consider your answer."

"It seems to me that you are assuming a good deal."

"Not without reason," I assured her.

"On the other hand, there may be no truth in what you say about my friends."

"Dangerous friends, Mrs. Asterley, who are bound to be brought to book, and you with them."

"Meanwhile?" she asked in a tone which suggested triumph.

"Frankly, it is to obviate inevitable disaster that I offer you this chance."

For a moment or two she looked at me without speaking. Then suddenly turning her back on me she crossed to the window and stared out. Facing me again I saw that her lips were trembling. I know now that I might have seen more had I not been so obsessed by my own thoughts.

"Then this woman means so much to you?" I looked at her without answering. "And you want to buy her back?"

"If you prefer to put it that way. Are you prepared to sell?"

She laughed almost excitedly. "You forget that I have nothing to sell."

"You are afraid?" I suggested.

"Not of you or your police," she snapped. "Have you anything more to say?"

"Did you know Tabbie was dead?"

"Dead! Tabbie!" Obviously she did not know, or I was much deceived.

"Murdered. Can you guess by whom?"

"I don't believe it. You're trying to frighten me. Why should he be murdered?"

"It was through him that Doctor Lal was prevented from working his will on Cynthia Clanwell. Now do you realize what I meant by saying that your friends were dangerous?"

"Again you assume too much," she parried.

"This is your chance, Mrs. Asterley; take it. You asked me just now if Miss Wallington meant so much to me. Frankly, everything. I am throwing myself on your mercy."

Curious indeed was the way in which she looked at me. Again those pouting lips trembled. For a moment I believed that her indecision presaged hope. But gradually her figure stiffened once more; her head went up, her provocative chin stuck out. The mouth curled scornfully.

"Why should you expect mercy from me?" she demanded. "Why, even if it were in my power, should I show mercy to you or that woman? What mercy have you shown me? As for her, let her rot for all I care. It's well that she should know what other women have to endure. If she's suffering now it's only right that she should. I wouldn't raise my finger to help her, or any of her luxury-pampered set. Let her dollars save her now; I wouldn't if I could. I hate her, hate her, and all that she stands for. What right has she to all the best in life while I . . . And you plead for mercy, selfish to the last, like all men. What does it matter to you if I am tortured so that she is spared! What does it matter to you, and men like you, if I am hounded from place to place like a pariah so long as the women you fancy can have the best of everything! But you see, it's not like that; there is justice on earth even if it's only the devil's. And wherever she is I'm glad she's suffering, and glad that you are suffering with her. Now you can go. It may be brave sport baiting a woman, but it carries its own punishment."

Tears were in her eyes, brilliant, flaming tears. I didn't know what to make of them. They might have been tears of anger, of remorse, of self-pity. Did she realize at last what a wreck she had made of her life? Such a woman must have experienced many great humiliations, many hours of bitter self-reproach. Who was she, whence had she come, how had she thus fallen?

"Why should you hate me, or her?"

She laughed outright, almost hysterically.

"Because you're a fool," she said. "Or perhaps it is because I hate instinctively all who have got what should have been mine. There, that's a confession; make the most of it."

"The gospel of Jask," I ventured. Again she laughed curiously, enigmatically.

"Whom you know so well?"

"Well enough to know that he will hang for the murder of Hughie Tabran."

"But that is true," she said; "he is really dead?"

"Are you now beginning to realize that we may be of mutual help to each other?"

"I am not one of the self-sacrificing kind," was her reply.

"Yet even now you are sacrificing yourself for a hopeless cause. You are afraid of those men?"

"No, I am afraid of myself."

"I promise they shall not harm you."

"They cannot harm me half as much as I have harmed myself. And now, please go. You waste your time with me, precious time that should be spent in searching for the woman with the dollars."

And yet, cruel as the sneer was, I had a curious feeling that it was not the true expression of her real sentiments. She was forcing herself to be bitter, driving herself to hatred; a soul in despair crying aloud in the wilderness of lost hopes.

An abortive interview. Much that had passed between us was at the time incomprehensible to me though others have since wondered why. Yet how could I imagine . . . Besides, I had never thought of her that way. Even Captain Asterley's denunciation of me to Julia had seemed too ridiculous to be worthy of a second thought.

Once more Albert and I walked away in gloomy mood. Briefly I told him what had happened. He looked at me in that penetrating way of his.

"Women are like that," he said, "and in their moods will even put something before money. Now this woman knows that she is suspect, that she is shadowed night and day, that wherever she goes that shadow is at her heels, yet for a whim, an odd twist of sentiment, she deliberately wrecks the best chance she is ever likely to get in this world. Can you beat it, sir?"

But just then I was thinking of quite other things than the psychology of sex. Staring into the blank outlook created by her refusal I shuddered with inconceivable dread. Lal stared at me with his wild fanatic eyes, Jask mocked me with his oily tongue. And beyond lay Julia, pale, helpless, pleading. I felt that I was going mad. What next; where should we turn now, what do?

As though reading my thoughts Albert suggested a visit to the Café Rivoli, adding, in effect, that

Karinsky might prove less impervious to the charm of gold. At any rate, he probably would not wreck a good chance from a superfluity of sentiment.

CHAPTER XV

THE SIGN OF THE GLOVE

WE hailed a taxi and drove straight to Soho. On the way I decided that the best method of tackling Karinsky would be to go straight to the point and terrorize him if necessary. Every man has a perfervid belief in the value of his own skin, and I had no reason to suppose that he would prove an exception. Intrigue might be an extremely fascinating and frequently remunerative occupation, but it carried certain risks which doubtless he would duly appreciate.

He was the first person we encountered as we passed through the glass door. There he was, heavy and curiously grotesque in his ill-fitting frock-coat. It being early the restaurant was empty. A waiter was laying a table at the far end of the room.

Rubbing his hands softly he advanced towards us. Recognizing me he smiled. I thought he was a little surprised, but this may have been fancy on my part. He began to apologize. Luncheon was not quite ready, but if we would be pleased to take a table . . .

Under my breath I said, "We want to speak to you, privately."

He shrugged and began with, "I regret——" But I cut him short.

"Police," I said. Elevating his brows he bowed.

"I am greatly honoured. Will you please follow me."

He led the way up those stairs which I had seen the four ascend on the occasion of my first visit, and showed us into a room which overlooked the street. It was a private dining-room, the chief ornaments of which were a table, two chairs, and a couch. In the centre of the table stood a glass vase with flowers. Albert, who entered last, shut the door and stood with his back against it. As Karinsky looked at me a smile broke over his puffy face.

"It is surprising," he began, "but I did not dream you were of the police; even now I almost fail to realize it. You will excuse me, but you have authority for this—visit?"

"A very proper question," I admitted, producing my credential, which I held before his eyes. But that other authority in my possession, signed by headquarters, which empowered me to call on the services of any metropolitan constable, I did not think it necessary to produce.

"I am at your service, sir," he said. "In what way can I assist you?"

"By telling me what you know of Leo Jask and Doctor Lal."

"Presuming that I am acquainted with those gentlemen?"

"You deny acquaintanceship?"

"You realize that I meet many people in the way of business?" he countered.

"But all are not politely shown upstairs as soon as they arrive. It might be wiser of you not to feign

ignorance. Your political activities are not unknown to us, but so far we are ready to admit that you are not as dangerous as your guests. Certain information has come to hand which makes it very necessary that we should interview Leo Jask. Frankly, Mr. Karinsky, his presence in this country is not thought desirable by the authorities, who think the climate of Moscow might suit him better."

A gleam of intelligence shot athwart his heavy face. "Ah, now I am beginning to understand. He is bolshevik, this gentleman of whom you speak?"

" You are not in sympathy with his ideals?"

" Me! I am ruined by them and forced to live in a foreign land. Once, when I was in Leningrad . . . But you would not know. Terrible things happened. Life, property, all went up in the flame of revolution. There is no peace, no hope of peace; and so I come to your noble country, sir, where a man may breathe freely."

" And consequently your gratitude is such that you would resent any attempt to injure it?"

" With my life." He pressed his hands on his projecting paunch and bowed solemnly.

" In that case you will not hesitate to tell me where I may find this Leo Jask?"

" With all the delight in the world, if I knew."

" I want you to realize that it may suit you to know, that it may be greatly to your advantage to know; for there are those who suspect that the Café Rivoli is something more than a restaurant, and that its proprietor is not quite the innocent person he would have the world believe. Now consider carefully, Mr. Karinsky, if it's not better to be on the side of

authority than against it. On the one hand is peace, security; on the other, inevitable disaster. If you are wise you will not hesitate to choose."

"But of course I am on the side of authority," he protested, "and you do me much wrong when you suggest suspicion. Consider! Why should I endanger my life and liberty for that which does not concern me? This man, you say, is bolshevik. Again consider what I suffer through him and his kind. Possibly he come here with plenty of money. I am *restaurateur*, nothing more; my house is open to all. If he pay for the private room, that is business. You appreciate?"

"Thoroughly. Like all of us, you work for money, not love?"

"But yes, certainly. Why not?"

"Then how much do you reckon his present address is worth to you?"

"But I don't understand."

"The police want him, Karinsky, and might pay well for certain information."

His little eyes narrowed cunningly, disgustingly. He looked a loathsome creature, flabby, avaricious, and almost absurd as he drew his ridiculous frock-coat tightly round his impossible figure.

"What you mean by that?" he asked.

"A thousand pounds for information which will lead to his immediate arrest."

He looked amazed. "A thousand pounds!" he echoed. "A fortune to a poor man like me, and I am unable to touch it! Was there ever so great a misfortune!"

"Humbug," muttered Albert; "twist his neck."

He flung a vindictive look at my companion, who returned it with one of withering contempt.

"It seems to me," I continued, "that a much greater misfortune is in store for those who associate themselves with Leo Jask and Doctor Lal. You realize that as a nation we resent the interference of foreigners?"

"Perfectly, perfectly," he replied quickly. "I also appreciate the security offered me by your laws and institutions, and would do all in my power to show that appreciation. Therefore I promise to watch, to watch close, and if he ever come to my restaurant again . . ."

"You may not be here to see. That fact is worth considering?"

"Much that you say is worth my deepest consideration. For example, a thousand pounds is a lot of money to a poor man."

"With security of domicile in addition."

"Yet, if what you say of this man is true, there is also much danger in his anger."

"I promise you adequate protection."

It was difficult to judge the state of his mind, a cunning mind and doubtless full of tricks. At one moment I really believed he was on the verge of confession. His hesitation and apparent nervousness indubitably led to such a belief. He fumbled with the lapels of his coat, now drawing them down tightly and now pushing them back with nervous fingers. Suddenly his eyes would meet mine and as suddenly turn away. Did he really know the whereabouts of those men and was afraid to admit as much, or was he cogitating the loss of a thousand pounds? That

he was artful and avaricious I had never a doubt, and if he could be sure of his future security there might be hope in him. But to persuade him of this would be difficult. If he were what I believed him to be he would have little faith in me or my mission, apart from those secret dangers which always dog the footsteps of the traitor. His masters knew how to avenge as well as how to award.

So far I had assumed, and doubtless with justice, his connection with the bolshevist movement, but beyond association with suspects I had no real proof of his complicity. It would have been easy enough to threaten and denounce, but was that likely to further my aim? He would heave his massive shoulders, spread his hands out protestingly, and stare at me in innocent amazement.

Meanwhile time was flying, time precious beyond words. The knowledge of how it was flying filled me with incredible terrors. Though but a few hours had passed since my escape, it already seemed like an eternity, crowded as it was with thoughts of Julia and the probable humiliations and tortures to which she might be subjected. If this man had any information to impart I must know it without further delay.

"Well," I asked, "have you decided; are you going to tell me all you know?"

"Alas," he replied, wringing his hands, "I would there were enough to earn me that money, for I need it badly, but I am afraid it means to pass me by. Yet should these persons ever come my way again . . ." There was a look in his eye which plainly indicated that he would be prepared to act.

Baffled, I could have struck him. At a nod from

me Albert's powerful fingers would have sunk themselves in his ponderous throat and shook confession from him. And never had I felt more like giving the signal. For I had no doubt whatever that the fellow was trifling with me. True, he might not have known the hiding-place of his confederates, but that he knew more of them than he was prepared to admit was obvious.

Sternly I looked at him. "I now go to headquarters to report, and you will remain strictly within doors. Possibly I may return within the hour. Meanwhile the Café Rivoli will be well protected. You understand what I mean?"

"Perfectly, sir. Be assured I shall respect your wishes."

He smiled and bowed as he held the door open for us to pass through. Albert paused and looked him up and down, and for the moment I thought he was going to plant his fist between those mocking eyes, or in that prodigious paunch, but he merely cursed silently. I never knew a man who had such an amazing lip-vocabulary.

Out into the hideous streets once more with a mind full of the most hideous misgivings. Over the house-tops dark clouds were piling ominously; a soft rain began to fall. People with turned-up collars hurried by. All was muffled, silent, dreary.

"He knows something!"

"A good deal, sir. Wish you'd told me to shake it out of him."

"And I thought every man had his price."

"If you can find out what it is," replied the cynic.

We walked on through the soft rain, crossed Regent

Street into Vigo Street, past the Burlington Arcade, and had turned the corner into Cork Street when a man rapidly approached us. It proved to be Tom Gregory, Albert's detective friend, last seen in charge of the redoubtable Binter. I nodded recognition, perhaps not too agreeably. The appearance of this man seemed but to accentuate failure.

"What have you done with Binter?" I heard Albert ask.

"Oh, he's safe."

"Anything else?"

"Perhaps."

I turned and faced him with a quick, questioning look. By this time we were in the hall. I watched him as he produced his pocket-book and began searching among its contents. "Ah, here it is." He handed me a dirty scrap of paper.

One glance was enough. *It was the Sign of the Glove!*

"Where did you get it?" I asked excitedly. He looked round the hall. I nodded. We mounted to my rooms in silence. Then I repeated the question.

"Out Newford way," he began, "there's a house at the end of the Green that came under suspicion some years ago. It belonged to a foreign gent who was connected with that Arcos business. You remember, sir, how the Government took the matter in hand?"

I nodded impatiently. He continued:

"Well, sir, I happened to be one of the men on that job, and this morning thought I might as well go out and have a look round; not hoping, of course, for much, but you never know. It's a long straggling Green, ill-kept, with a few old elms growing anyhow,

and Green Lodge, as the house is called, is at the extreme end, and stands in its own grounds."

"Which end is that?" I interrupted sharply. He paused for a moment, thinking.

"It would be the west end, sir."

I gave Albert a sharp look. He nodded understandingly.

"Yes?" My impatience was running away with me.

"It's a quiet place, a sort of backwater off the main road. There's a pub half-way up the Green and two or three shops, but all the other houses are private."

"Quite so." His topographical information was useful, but just then seemed unduly spun out.

"Well, sir, I first passed on the farther side of Green Lodge without seeing anything suspicious. All the blinds were drawn, and it looked as though the house was unoccupied. In about quarter of an hour I came back again, but this time on the near side. The house stands back about twenty yards from the footpath and is enclosed by a high iron fence, along which are thick patches of ivy. In one of these patches a bit of paper caught my eye. I slipped my hand through the rails and pulled it out."

"No one saw you?"

"I don't think so, sir. The shrubbery is thick just about there, and some laurels hide the view from the window. Naturally I didn't linger."

"Good work," said Albert approvingly.

I was beside myself with excitement, even now scarcely crediting the tremendous truth though I held the precious Sign in my hand. I looked from one to the other in sheer amazement. Such an incredible

stroke of luck was scarcely to be believed. Doubt assailed me. There must be a catch in it somewhere.

"How do you account for it?" I asked.

"I can't, sir." I turned to Albert. He smiled.

"Didn't I always say that Miss Julia had her wits about her. She found a way, sir. Trust a woman. We'll do the rest."

I would have shared his optimism, but at the back of my mind an unhappy reservation throbbed painfully. Guarded as she was, how had she managed to loosen that slip of paper; how had they come to overlook her possession of it? Was it another trap?

Though I could not wholly credit this singular piece of good fortune, I was careful to hide all doubts from my companions. We accordingly, and at once, began a discussion of ways and means to achieve our end. Gregory was for bold measures; a force of police and a raid. I looked at Albert for approval, but failed to find it. Slowly he shook his head. To him it was plainly as obvious as it was to me that if we hoped for success in this venture we should have to employ strategy. At the first sign of danger they would frustrate all our hope. We dared not give them the slightest hint of our intention or approach. Enough damage could be done in a second to destroy my last chance of happiness. That second must not be given them.

To Gregory I pointed out my fears. These men were desperate. With the rope already round their necks the perpetration of another crime would be a matter of slight importance. Nor had I a doubt that they would commit it if merely out of spite. Jask and

Asterley might be eager for money, but I was not so sure that Lal would be swayed by the thought of it. His fanaticism was such, his hatred of the "oppressor" so great, that nothing short of revenge would satisfy his mad obsession. A curious psychological phenomenon that little Indian. Was he really mad, or mad only on the one subject? Had he dreams of the liberation of his country through a reign of terror? All tyrants lived in a constant dread of assassination. Police and soldiers could not always assure them of security. A bomb thrown, a shot from the crowd; how were these to be guarded against? History had shown, even our own late history, that concessions might be wrung by intimidation. Heaven only knows how wildly he may have dreamed.

And against me he would have a black mark, knowing that I had not a little to do with the frustration of his schemes. How much he hated me I had already sound proof. Would he know that I had escaped the ordeal by water? I sincerely hoped not, nor could I see how he should. But a few hours had elapsed since their hurried flight. Believing that he had accomplished his purpose as far as I was concerned, he and his companions could patiently await developments. They would also realize the danger of venturing forth, and the folly of undertaking it. Nor could they be under any misapprehension of a comparatively swift discovery of their crime. Therefore time was on my side. Against this I had too openly proclaimed that I was alive. The question was, how deeply were Karinsky and Mrs. Asterley involved? Would they, knowing the danger incurred, dare further to commit themselves, even if the opportunity

occurred? This I was inclined to doubt. They would be running too great a risk.

Much dubious speculation in all this, but I set it down as it came to me in the midst of our discussion of ways and means to achieve our purpose. We agreed that we must assume they would not know of my escape, chiefly, I think, because we dared not favour any other assumption. Also that our attack must be strategic. It would be easy enough to surround the house and beat down all opposition, but before that could be accomplished the thing I dreaded most would have happened.

CHAPTER XVI

GREEN LODGE

FORTUNATELY the weather was helpful to the serious business in hand. Looking through the window I saw that the drizzle I had noted on leaving the Café Rivoli had developed into a soft steady rain. A perfectly hideous day, bleak, gloomy, forbidding, with a prospect of fog. What the night would be like was no difficult matter to guess. But I did not regret it, for it seemed to me that it might prove to our advantage. We would need such weather if we were to hope for success. For it had been decided upon that we were to try and force a secret entry. In this Albert's unique facility in opening doors and windows might prove an incalculable asset.

Gregory thought it might be possible, with luck, to effect an entrance at the back of Green Lodge, which, he informed us, was surrounded by a fair-sized walled garden that might be negotiated without difficulty. The real difficulty would be, of course, in effecting an entrance to the house itself. In this I trusted to Albert's burglarious skill. He was, in fact, an astounding picker of locks, due to a natural ability and an early apprenticeship to the locksmith's trade. More than once I had had cause to bless that apprenticeship. If success depended on his skill in

that department there would be little doubt of the result.

"A first-class burglar would be useful now," said the detective.

We agreed, but did not take him into our confidence. You never know.

I think I commended short days for about the first time in my life. By four o'clock it would be dark, perhaps earlier, unless the atmosphere underwent some miraculous change, which was not anticipated. Indeed, I never remember a more depressing or dreary outlook.

About one o'clock Gregory went off promising to return by three. He would not stop to lunch, having one or two things that needed doing. He was a square-faced fellow, fair-haired and blue-eyed, with a provocative chin and nose. Without a doubt a good man in a scrap, and I was more than glad to have him with us.

With all this we were, of course, presupposing that the people we wanted were at Green Lodge. The possibility that they might have taken refuge elsewhere was not overlooked. Gregory had observed no movement of any sort. The blinds were all down and the house apparently unoccupied. But to set against this was his discovery of the Sign. If they were not there, or had not been there, how was that to be accounted for? That they had been and gone I would not seriously consider. The time was too short. Presently they might scatter, in all probability would, but they could not do so before night-fall, and we should then be there to see that they didn't.

Meanwhile I was afraid to think of Julia and her possible danger. Already I had experienced a series of horrors sufficient to turn the brain of a dozen men. I had a devastating fear of Lal. That little man had more venom in him than a legion of his native cobras. His mad brain, inflamed by blind fanaticism, was capable of the most monstrous cruelty. Like those holy inquisitors of which one reads and shudders he would know neither pity nor mercy. That he would ultimately spare her was not to be thought of. But not knowing of my escape he might allow her to linger for a time. Or so it was I tried to think, not daring to think otherwise. There was also the possibility that the others might have a word to say. Though neither Jask nor Asterley might over-value human life, each would realize that the life they held in their hands might still be too valuable to destroy.

Albert and I talked and waited. Methodically he prepared a meal which we made a pretence of eating. I felt every mouthful turn to dust. My eyes followed the slow leaden movements of the clock. How dreadfully the minute hand seemed to drag ! With a grim smile he brought my service revolver and a box of cartridges and laid them before me, but never had I entered on an adventure with so little heart. I was shaken by a multitude of fears. If we should fail ; if at the last moment . . . Realizing my state he repeated his brave assurances that everything would turn out all right. Tom Gregory was a good sort and might be counted on. He had no fear of him. Of course he wasn't Mr. Wally ; but it was no use thinking of him, and he was sure Tom wouldn't fail us in a crisis.

Between two and three the weather took a further change for the worse. Night seemed to come down with a rush. I went to the window and looked out expecting to see fog, but it was a heavy blackness due to massed clouds. For the moment the rain had ceased, but I saw that it would soon descend again, this time in a deluge.

At three o'clock to the moment Gregory turned up, quiet and determined as of yore. To him this was merely a police matter, perhaps a little out of the usual, but all the more interesting on that account. He knew what he had to do and how he would set about doing it. I had never a doubt of him.

Upon his arrival Albert went round to the garage for the car. Though Gregory knew as well as I that the rescue of Julia was the matter of chief importance, I'm afraid I rather unnecessarily emphasized the fact over and over again. He nodded understandingly. Without saying as much I knew he would not neglect his opportunity.

As we left Cork Street the rain began to fall again, but this time accompanied by fierce gusts of wind. Though it was only about half-past three it was already dark. In another half-hour it would probably be pitch black.

We turned westward and sped along the Bayswater Road. Gregory was sitting in front with Albert, but I don't believe they spoke a word to each other till we passed through Ealing. Then I saw their heads go together and Albert nod. From this it was evident that we were rapidly approaching our destination, and that Gregory was explaining the route.

Some distance farther on we swung away to the

left off the main road, and the car slowed down. It was now so dark that I could just perceive the hedges on either side of us. Albert had occasionally to switch on the headlights to see where he was going, but I noticed that he employed them sparingly.

For some time we crawled along through the darkness, then turned again to the left. Through what was apparently a gap in the hedge the car was driven and then suddenly stopped. All lights were immediately doused. Gregory alighted and met me as I opened the door.

"This is the place, sir." I looked round but could see nothing. "The house is down there," he continued, pointing into the gloom, "about a hundred yards. We're at the westward, or farther end of the Green."

By this time the wind had risen and was blowing almost a gale. It drove the rain stingingly into our faces and roared like a demon through the bare trees. Gregory laughed softly.

"Couldn't have a better night," he said.

Or a worse. Which was it to be? Albert, imperturbable as ever, joined us. Though he ventured no remark on the nature of the night I knew he would appreciate.

We started off in Indian file, Gregory first, I next, Albert bringing up the rear. In this manner we slipped and stumbled for what seemed to me a considerable distance till Gregory suddenly came to a halt.

"There's the house," he said, pointing to a shadow which I barely distinguished in the gloom. "The wall runs down that way," suiting the action to the

word. "Better shelter under it for a second while I take a squint at the front."

He vanished in the darkness. Albert and I did as we were bidden. As far as I could see the wall was not very formidable, and not more than about eight or nine feet high. I saw Albert looking up at it and guessed that he was gauging the distance. But he made no remark. Walls were matters of slight importance to him.

Very soon Gregory returned.

"All quiet, sir," he reported, "and not a gleam of light anywhere."

Once more the dreadful fear swept through me that the house might be unoccupied, and that the people we were after, if they had ever been there, were gone. But of this fear I betrayed no inkling. Gregory would not have understood the state of my nerves, while Albert, though he might have understood, would scarcely have believed.

Carefully we skirted the wall until we reached the end without finding what we considered a likely spot. But turning the corner we came upon a door let into the wall, and for the first time Albert made a noise which sounded exceedingly like a chuckle.

"Here's a bit of luck," he whispered.

But it proved to be not quite so lucky as he had anticipated, for despite his efforts it refused to open.

"Bolted!" he explained in his matter-of-fact way. "Here, Tom, give us a back."

Tom obeyed, and presently Albert was peeping over the wall. Then he pulled himself up, lay along the top like a great cat, and dropped over.

It may have been partly owing to the roaring of the

wind, the hissing of the rain, but I never caught the slightest sound of bolts or lock being tampered with. All I know is that the gate suddenly opened to admit us, and was softly shut again by the ever-thoughtful one. Even in the gloom I saw the detective fling a quick look at him. He was to look again before the night was out.

As it was now pitch dark, and the trees and shrubs were numerous, our present danger lay in inadvertently blundering into some obstacle, or by falling into a hole spraining an ankle or damaging an arm. But these dangers we successfully avoided, and presently found ourselves in the deeper shadow of the house. Here we waited, listening, but no sound save the roaring of the wind and the hissing of the rain reached us. We could not have ordered a better night for the enterprise.

Albert tried the door, but without success. Again he reported in a whisper, "Bolted on the inside." Gregory also reported that the windows on either side of the door were heavily shuttered. This did not promise well. I suggested that the front might be easier. Anyway, we could reconnoitre. Creeping round the corner I presently encountered an obstruction which I at first thought was a box, probably a dust-bin, but on a closer inspection I found that it was apparently attached to the side of the house. I stooped low examining its structure. Albert dropped on his knees beside me.

"Seems to me like the entrance to a cellar," he whispered. And then, a moment or so after, he ejaculated a satisfactory, "Ah, as I thought." And then again, "Padlocked!"

I waited while he worked. Gregory stood, a motionless shadow, staring down. Presently I heard a soft click and knew that our ingenious one had succeeded. Carefully he lifted the cover, disclosing a dark aperture. We both stared down into it, listening, but heard nothing. Then I leant over and flashed my torch. Lumps of coal were plainly discernible. This information I whispered to him and at once prepared to descend.

Swinging my legs over the aperture I gave him one of my hands. Carefully he lowered me until my feet came in contact with the coal. Here I again paused for a moment listening acutely. Then I flashed my torch round the place. It was probably about six feet long and three or four in width. On the floor might have been scattered half a ton of coal. There was a low door at the farther end. Moving quickly across to this I found that it was open. Against it I again paused, listening. Returning to the opening I whispered that the way was clear, and presently was joined by the others.

Emerging through the low door of the cellar we found ourselves in what appeared to be a fair-sized room, which upon a further investigation proved to be a kitchen. There was a table in the centre, above which swung an electric bulb. But I had seen a door at the other end of the room, and to this I tiptoed, the others following. The door was partly open. Just inside it my flash showed a switch, and I was on the point of turning on the light when I distinctly heard footsteps approaching. The others must also have heard, for as one our torches were extinguished.

The door opening inwards was the only cover that offered itself. We pressed close against the wall. The footsteps drew nearer, the door was pushed back, and the next moment the room was flooded with light. I had drawn my revolver in readiness, and as the person unsuspiciously entered the room I stepped out and covered him, or rather her. For it was a woman!

"Don't make a sound! We're police!" As she swung round I heard the door softly closed behind me.

I recognized her in a moment. It was Teska, Mrs. Asterley's maid. In her hands she held a coal-scuttle, which I had a sudden horrible fear that she would drop. Albert must have entertained a similar thought, for with a quick movement he was beside her and had wrenched it from her hands.

I advanced, still pointing the gun at her. But she never flinched, betrayed no symptom of flinching; indeed rather regarded me with amazement.

"You have nothing to fear," I continued to reassure her, "if you keep quiet. We won't hurt you, and it will be to your advantage."

"You!" she said, alarm and amazement still in her eyes. "They think you're dead."

"Not yet."

"But how—"

"Never mind that. Is Miss Wallington here?"

"Yes."

"And is she—" I had not the courage to say more.

"You have not come too soon," she said. "He's up there—Doctor Lal." Then she began to whine. "Poor lady; be careful if you would save her." It

was now my turn to look at her in amazement. " You don't understand. They forced me to this. I have done all that I could for her."

I passed all this over. Julia was alive—up there ! That was the great, the wonderful thing !

" How many of them are there ? " I asked.

" Three, all desperate. That black man is mad, dangerous as a tiger. But for the others . . . But they too are tired of her obstinacy. She is very brave. Always she thinks that you are coming. She waits and hopes and prays, even though they have told her that you cannot come, that you are dead."

" Has Lal . . . "

" How can I say ? But she grows weak, and sometimes I fear that he . . . I think he is mad, mad ! Even I am afraid. He watches me, questions me, threatens. I know that when she goes they will send me with her."

Was I to believe her ? How could I ? Was she not one of them ? Those piercing black eyes, that hard mouth ; how was one to credit their possessor with sentiments of humanity ? And yet I was conscious of a half-belief in her protestations. Possibly she was quick to see the error of her ways, the immediate dawn of punishment, and hope in conciliation.

" If what you say is true," I said, " and you have been kind to this poor lady, it will help you a great deal ; but if you are lying you will suffer equally with your confederates. Now, where is she, and where are they ? "

" I do not lie, as she will tell you."

" I shall not forget to ask. Now, how does one reach them ? "

"They are in the drawing-room, first floor. At the end of the passage you will see the stairs."

"And Miss Wallington?"

"She is in the room behind."

"How does one reach it?"

"Through folding doors."

"This is all true?"

"I will prove it."

"How?"

"By showing you the way."

Without consulting the others I assented, believing that if we were to succeed surprise was essential. "But remember," I added, "trickery will be dangerous."

A hard smile passed over her hard face. "There will be no trickery. Follow me. I have been here too long already."

She picked up the coal-scuttle and opened the door. I stood close to her, the gun in my hand. As we were about to step out she came to a sudden pause. Someone was descending the stairs! With my free hand I gripped her shoulder. She never flinched.

"Teska!" came a sharp voice.

"Coming, sir," she answered instantly.

"Then hurry."

A quick step crossed the hall, to be followed a moment later by the click of a lock, the closing of the front door.

"Has he gone out?" I whispered.

"Yes."

Luck in this, I thought. Only two of them now! She stepped out, I close behind her. Though I had relinquished my grip on her shoulder I did not relax

my vigilance. Stealthily we stole through the darkness, I keeping in bodily touch with her. Albert, who came next, was close on my heels, ready, I knew, for possible ambush.

The hall was dark, the stairs in gloom. As we proceeded to mount I laid hold of Teska's skirt. Reaching the head of the stairs she suddenly switched on the light. Then she pointed to the door before us. I questioned with a look. She nodded. They were in there!

With something of a clatter she placed the scuttle on the floor. Waving me aside she knocked, and without waiting for permission to enter opened the door. I calculated that they would naturally turn on her entrance, and seeing who it was relapse once more into a feeling of security. But in this I was disappointed. As I entered close behind her shouting, "Hands up!" I saw a man in the centre of the room, and recognized him at once as Lal. He also saw me, and sensing danger, fired. Quick as thought was his action. The woman reeled backward against me, which probably saved my life; for he fired again and again, and had he not, in retreating, stumbled against a chair which momentarily destroyed his balance, he would undoubtedly have got me. I sprang and seized him before he could recover his equilibrium.

The shock had knocked the gun from his hand; mine also had clattered unheeded to the floor. As I held him fast just below the throat our eyes met and he recognized me. With that recognition he suddenly became imbued with the strength and agility of a tiger. He turned on me hissing, spitting, striking. Though in an ordinary way I could easily have crushed

him, his fury made of him a most formidable opponent. As he struck he gibbered excitedly in his native tongue. His slight body was electric with rage. Every hold I got he seemed to shake off, and so swift was he in his movements that I could never plant a blow just where I wanted it. But though I never really let him get away from me, I experienced the utmost difficulty in securing a grip on him. But for an error on his part Heaven only knows what would have happened.

Out of the corner of his eye he must have seen his revolver within possible reach. Anyway, he swooped towards it, and I on him. Though his fingers touched the weapon they failed to close on it. Indeed, they knocked it farther away as he fell, due to the sudden blow I had caught him on the side of the head. Full on the floor he crashed. I was on top of him, my hands on his throat. But as he gave no sign of life I dropped his limp body and rose. And this is what I saw—Albert and Jask locked in a deadly struggle. They were a pair of powerful men, well-matched in every particular, though Albert was in the better condition. Each I saw was trying to get at the other's throat. Albert was grim and silent as death, but Jask was spluttering and cursing volubly in fluent English. Gregory stood looking on, his automatic in his hand, doubtless ready to strike a blow should opportunity occur. That he must have been warned off I realized. I knew that leave-him-to-me look of Albert's. I had seen it before.

And then it all happened in a second. Albert, his hands round Jask's throat, had slowly forced him to his knees; but it would seem that as Jask's hands

came in contact with the floor they also came in contact with something else—which happened to be Lal's revolver. Albert, however, saw the movement and immediately clutched his adversary's wrist. Jask wriggled, but that grip held him down. Then suddenly a shot rang out. I sprang forward, fearing; but Albert looked steadily at his opponent for a moment as if to make sure. Then he rose slowly shaking his head.

"He didn't get you, Albert?"

"No, sir; got himself."

Jask rolled over on his face.

CHAPTER XVII

THAT NIGHT

THOUGH I noticed that the woman Teska still lay on the floor where she had fallen I had no time to examine her condition. There were the folding doors of which she had spoken, and behind them . . . What should I find ? Motioning for Gregory to secure the Indian, who was already showing signs of returning consciousness, I pushed wide the doors and entered the inner room, Albert close behind me. At first I saw nothing, the room being but dimly lighted by a dying fire. He, however, found the switch. Then I saw her !

She was seated some distance from the fire, bound to a chair, gagged, and apparently staring into vacancy.

"Julia—darling !" I called to her as I flung myself at her feet. Her eyes met mine with a frightened, vacant look. Then something like recognition stole into them and they filled with tears.

While I was removing the gag Albert was busy slashing with his knife. I took her in my arms and pressed her to me. Her body shook with sudden sobbing as she buried her face against my breast.

"Darling, you're safe," I whispered in her ear. "It's Peter. Don't you recognize me ? Look at me, my dear ; tell me, tell me."

Slowly she raised her head. The beautiful eyes, still blurred with tears, looked into mine.

"I thought you would never come," she said.

Albert had his flask ready. I took it and poured a few drops between her teeth. She coughed and shuddered. Watching her anxiously I thought a little colour stole into her pale cheeks. I pressed her closer to me. She was deadly cold.

"Better bring her into the other room, sir." I nodded. He went out.

Though she was still sobbing in a weak and plaintive manner I felt insensibly that she was reviving. Once I even thought she tried to smile. Though a pitiful effort it stirred hope.

She was dressed exactly as I had last seen her. But the dainty frock was crumpled and soiled, the beautiful hair disarranged, the lovely face pallid and thin with suffering.

I lifted her in my arms, carried her into the next room, and placed her in a chair before the fire. But though I saw Lal, handcuffed, huddled on the floor, with Gregory standing over him, the bodies of Jask and Teska had been removed. Albert had thoughtfully seen to that. He smiled as our eyes met.

As he looked down at her she suddenly opened her eyes. Amazement and joy flashed in them.

"It's Albert!" she said.

"Yes, miss; we're all here. Everything's all right. We've come to take you home."

"Oh, it's all too marvellous," she murmured. Then she sat up a little, and as her eyes wandered round the room they encountered Lal. She shuddered, hiding her face in her hands.

"Courage, darling," I implored. "He can't harm you any more. Nobody shall harm you again."

"Best get her out of this, sir, quick as we can. I'll go and fetch the car."

It was Albert who spoke. I nodded, and with another encouraging look at her he left the room. It was then Lal began to speak, and his voice was as oily and as suave as of old, with here and there a sinister mocking tone in it singularly repellent.

"I congratulate you, Leathermouth," he said; "you are not the fool I took you to be. For about the first time in my life I have underrated an enemy, with a not ill-deserved result. This is no world for failures. Yet it intrigues me more than a little to know how you escaped the ordeal by water. Do you feel like satisfying my curiosity? Tabran was not so lucky, but then he was a mere interfering blunderer who was foolish enough to cross my path."

"You shall learn all in good time," I assured him.

"But time is short, and it would be some satisfaction to know before I go."

"You shall know."

"But you don't understand. I must know quickly if the knowledge is to be of any use to me."

"It won't."

"So you think like that. Then perhaps you will pass on the information to my friend Jask. He also will be greatly interested. A remarkable man, Leo Jask, with a luck almost equal to your own. I think you will hear of him again, you and your hateful tyranny that you euphemistically term a government."

"I do not think he will take any further interest in governments."

"Then he will be dead."

"You saw how he brought it on himself. It was his only way to cheat the hangman."

He smiled. "So you still think that Count Solini was Leo Jask? And I have been crediting you with intelligence. I apologize."

At this I was more than startled, though I still believed the little wretch was trying to hoodwink me. He continued to smile in a superior, exasperating sort of way.

"Ah, Leathermouth, if the stars were not with you, you would be nothing but a dull blundering clod and the easiest of victims. Jask, gifted with an uncanny premonition of coming events, which more than once has enabled him to baffle his enemies, left this house a minute or so before you arrived. If you had not been deaf as well as stupid you might have heard him go."

I remembered that step on the stairs, the person who had called to Teska, the closing of the front door, but I would not believe what this little villain was saying. Once more he was trying to confuse the issue.

"Then who is Count Solini?"

"You would like to know?"

"If any truth is in you."

"It is because of the truth that is in me that I have come to this. Count Solini was Captain Asterley, the husband of our charming Anna. He *died* in Persia some time ago." Again that mocking tone.

"That, on the face of it, is a lie. I have seen photographs of Jask."

He laughed, showing his white teeth. " You mean you have seen photographs of Asterley labelled Jask. When one would outwit a powerful enemy it is necessary to employ subterfuge. The trick appears to have been highly successful. Before long you will know that Jask is very much alive."

During this give and take, though I occasionally flashed a glance at him, I was concentrating on Julia, noting with joy the animation that was slowly returning to her face. She seemed to be vaguely interested in what we were saying, but that she really understood I am inclined to doubt. One thing, however, I did not fail to observe: she never looked in his direction.

Then came almost immediately a quick rush of feet, a scuffle, followed by a low oily laugh from Lal. Looking round I saw him in Gregory's grip.

" What's the matter? "

" He's swallowed something."

" Something most potent," smiled the Indian, " something, Leathermouth, that will effectually cheat your friend the hangman." He looked up at Gregory. " The next time you get a man like me, handcuff him behind." He continued to smile, but in evil fashion. " Yes, Leathermouth, it's true; in a few minutes I shall be beyond the reach of you all. I thought West would be best for you, but it seems that I am to go first. I wonder if you know how lucky you are? It makes one think that there must be . . . But that's superstitious nonsense. Yet it's most singular. Jask had told me some strange tales about you. If one did not know that we die like dogs one might almost think . . . Among the ignorant, out there in

the East, they tell of *three* men who seemed to bear charmed lives. You and your servant were two; but of the other? Where is he? It seemed to me that there was nothing extraordinary about you; I cannot think so even now. Yet when I had you fast the miracle happened. That woman there, your lover, the woman with the dollars; she too was mine. In time she would have been wholly mine, but her dollars preserved her. My friends needed them, I needed them; they would have helped the cause, bought power, resistance, hope. I smote down one of the oppressors; I would have smitten them all. Now I go, and my country is still in chains. No matter, I have loosened a link; others will follow me. To die is nothing, we all come to it; but to live in the great heart of one's country, that is a glory that death cannot steal from us."

He rambled on and on, his eyes shining with a supernatural brilliance. But what more he said I cannot remember. There was much more talk of chains, despots, tyrants and the like, in the midst of which I was glad to see Albert enter, to hear his matter-of-fact, "Car at the door, sir." He had a big fur rug across his arm.

Lal turned his brilliant eyes on him and muttered, "The *second*. I shall never see the *third*."

I flung a quick look at the square-faced Gregory. "You will stay on until I send relief."

"Yes, sir."

Lal continued to babble, but unheeding him I wrapped Julia in the fur rug, caught her up in my arms, carried her from the room, down the stairs and so out to the car. Albert sprang to the wheel and

soon we were moving off through the wind and the rain.

Closely I held my precious burden, whispering words of comfort. Whether she heard or understood I cannot say; but I think she did, for from time to time she seemed to nestle closer, press her cheek to mine, and once her arm wound itself round my neck.

At the extremity of the Green, Albert pulled up for a moment, and I dimly perceived the glistening cape of a policeman. Then we went on again.

Without mishap we reached the hotel and I carried her in, disdaining the help of the porter. Doubtless a little consternation in that vestibule, for I seemed to see several people lounging about as I made straight for the lift. An official pushed his way forward, to whom I whispered her name. He nodded. I told Albert to get on to Roper-Lees.

Tremendous was the amazement of Elsie. She stared at me, the figure in my arms, her face turning ghastly with sudden terror. I nodded encouragingly as I carried Julia into her room and laid her on the bed.

"Quick," I said, "get her between the sheets. The doctor will be here soon. For Heaven's sake pull yourself together, girl; there's no cause for alarm."

I went out into the sitting-room. Albert joined me almost immediately.

"I got him without trouble, sir. He'll be here in a few minutes."

Despite her terror Elsie must have worked with uncommon rapidity, for when I presently peeped into the room Julia was already lying snugly between the sheets. The girl looked round at me.

"She's asking for you, sir."

As I advanced and leant over her the beautiful eyes gladdened.

"Peter," she whispered, "Peter—darling."

Roper-Lees was on time. Greeting him I briefly narrated what had happened. He nodded understandingly.

"Chiefly shock," he pronounced after the examination. "Nothing to worry about. I have administered a sedative. She is highly nervous and mustn't be left alone. I will come again in the morning."

Left alone! I went into her and held her hand, and watched her while she slept. All through the night I sat there. If I moved ever so slightly her fingers seemed insensibly to tighten on mine. Once that movement brought the plaintive wail, "Don't leave me, darling; I'm frightened, frightened!"

And so the long night passed. Sometimes that night seems like a dream. Probably I too half-dozed and dreamt as I sat there holding her hand, not moving of my own volition, scarcely daring to breathe. Once she woke, shuddering, uttering a cry of fear. Elsie, who was lying on a couch near the foot of the bed, sprang up and questioned me with startled eyes. I motioned for her not to move or speak, and presently my darling was quiet again.

And so the night passed. Outside another day was dawning, doubtless in gloom; but there was no gloom in my heart, for when Julia awoke she turned her face to me and smiled, and I knew the crisis had passed.

CHAPTER XVIII

JULIA'S STORY

ROPER-LEES came early. His smile was reassuring.

"No danger now," he pronounced; "care is all that is necessary, and I think I may trust you to see to that." I assured him he need have no concern. "I'll look in again during the day."

When I re-entered the room I found Julia propped up with pillows. She greeted me with a smile and extended hands.

"You poor old darling," she said, "what a worry I am to you."

"You're that all right."

"Elsie has told me everything." I frowned at the girl.

"Sure," said that young person, grinning broadly.

"You're fired, Elsie."

"Guess it looks now as though it might soon come to that."

Julia laughed. I looked at her in delighted amazement.

"You're also fired, Peter, but only as a nurse. Now you can go, but come back again, quick. I'm going to get up."

"You're going to do nothing of the sort."

"Listen to that, Elsie. Would you believe it ! There's a tyrant for you."

"Men are all like that," said the girl.

"But, darling . . ."

"Don't worry—Leathermouth."

"Julia !" I protested. "You know that name."

"I love it more than ever. Now run away like a good boy, but come back *pronto*, as John would say. Won't he be surprised ! "

"He'll never forgive me."

"I shouldn't worry about that."

In the next room I found Albert. He had been to Cork Street and found everything in order. Just before leaving Mr. Mayford had rung up. "Anxious to see you, sir. I told him you were busy. He swore."

"I'm just running round for a clean-up. You're in charge while I'm away."

"Yes, sir."

Probably that was the quickest shave and bath I ever had in my life, but quick as it was it had apparently given Julia plenty of time to carry out her threat ; for when I returned to her apartment I found her curled up on the sofa before the fire in the daintiest and smartest of negligées. She greeted me with a provoking smile.

"You dared—" I began.

"Albert, I think the Colonel is badly in need of breakfast."

"Yes, miss."

"You dared," I began again as soon as we were alone.

"I'm feeling great," she said, "and hungry as a starved wolf in winter. But, oh, my dear!"

"Yes, I know."

We were finishing the meal when George Mayford was announced. He went straight to Julia, took her hand and kissed it.

"A thousand congratulations, my dear."

"Thank you, George."

"No serious effects?"

"Not really; just a bit shaken."

He looked at me and shook his big head. Then he turned to her and smiled. "I knew he'd blunder right; he always does. I don't know what to make of the fellow."

"Julia's going to try what she can do."

"I'm sorry for her. Be brave, my dear, and patient; you never know. I've tried hard enough. Perhaps in your hands . . . By the way—" Questioningly he looked at Julia.

"Go on," she said; "I'm anxious to know."

"Lal is dead, and the woman Teska. The shots that were meant for you, Peter . . ." Julia shuddered. "I'm sorry, dear."

She looked at me. Her hand stole into mine.

"Jask," he continued.

"Jask?"

"That must have been a rare set-to with Albert. He's as bad as his master, Julia. I can't make head or tail of either of them."

"John always said he was a great guy, and I agree with him; and so does Peter, don't you, darling?"

George flung me a sly look. At last a woman was

openly calling me "darling," and not blushing to say it. Put that in your pipe, George Mayford!

"I'm one with you all, and in riddling me of Jask——"

"A bit quick, George," I interrupted. "That wasn't Jask, that was Captain Asterley, otherwise Count Solini."

He needed a good deal of convincing, but Julia's testimony clinched the matter. The man who had come to her as the indignant husband was Jask in masquerade. She told us how they had laughed over the deception. George looked exceedingly glum.

"Then the beggar's got away?"

"Obviously, unless your smart young men . . ."

"That means more trouble," he muttered.

"Not in England, at any rate. Unless I'm much mistaken he'll seize the first opportunity to flit to fairer, and safer, climes."

"I hope you're right, but we're not going to open the gate for him to pass through."

"Perhaps he's passed through already."

"Of course you always were an optimist." Again he took her hand and kissed it. "Adios, my dear, and once more a thousand congratulations."

"Adios, George. Remember me to Molly."

"May she call to-morrow?"

"Why not?"

"Good. She's been mad with excitement."

That night, after dinner (I would not let her speak before), she told me her story, and I here set it down as clearly as I can remember. She had slept well during the afternoon and awoke singularly refreshed. The colour was slowly coming back to her cheeks, and

I knew that nature would soon repair all ravages. We dined in her apartment, and afterwards drew up the sofa before the fire and nestled into it, she deep in cushions. Albert and Elsie had been sent to the Pictures, in spite of strenuous objection, for we wanted to have the world to ourselves. And though the rain beat furiously on the windows, and the wind blew in angry gusts, we were selfish enough to forget everything but that we were together again, and thankful beyond words.

"After leaving you that afternoon," she began, "I rested for a while, and then remembering that the clasp of my necklace was loose, and that time was precious, I decided to take it round to Christy's and get them to fix it as soon as possible. As it wasn't raining, and I knew the shop wouldn't shut till six, I decided to walk. I remember being hailed by a taxi-driver before turning into Piccadilly, but took no notice of him, though I had a sort of impression that he continued to crawl just behind me.

"I walked along Piccadilly, turned into Bond Street, entered Christy's and showed them what I wanted doing to the necklace. They said they would send it round the next day, but as I saw a cigarette-case I suddenly decided to give you, and as I thought I would like you to see it first, I told them I would call.

"As I stepped out of the shop a taxi came crawling by, and suddenly remembering that I hadn't too much time to dress I hailed it and jumped in—and realized instantly that I was not alone. But before I could call out I was pulled down on the seat and a cloth, smelling strongly of chemicals, was pressed over my mouth."

"Chloroform?" I said.

"Undoubtedly. I remember struggling, feeling that I was being suffocated, and gradually succumbing to the sensation.

"When I awoke from what seemed to me like a long sleep, I was sitting in a strange room, the room they brought me into that awful night when I saw you bound and helpless, and Captain Asterley, for so I imagined him then, was standing looking at me with an amused smile on his face. Though my heart sank I tried to be brave, demanding the meaning of such an outrage.

"'Don't distress yourself,' he said. 'I regret the necessity as much as you. No harm shall come to you. My friends and I just wish to have a quiet little business chat with you. After that you will be free to go.'

"'My friends will also have something to say about this.'

"'No doubt. Between us we should have no difficulty in coming to an amicable arrangement.'

"'Where am I?' I asked.

"'Please don't let that distress you. You are as secure as though you were in your own apartment at the May Fair. But here are my friends.'

"Glancing round I saw two men enter. One was a little black man with bright staring eyes; the other a thick-set, unpleasant-looking person who looked at me in a way that made me shudder. You guess who they were?

"The thick-set man, whom we now know to be the *real* Captain Asterley, was introduced as Count Solini. He began by expressing the extreme pleasure he felt

in making my acquaintance, and showered me with nauseous compliments. The Indian stood staring at me, but never saying a word. And yet, do you know, I had a feeling that he was the real danger. There was something eerie, uncanny about him, that made me feel creepy. But though I was inwardly trembling I determined to show no sign of it, and once more began to denounce them for the outrage, promising swift punishment. I had powerful friends who would strain every effort, who would . . . With Heaven only knows how much more of the same excited talk.

"They heard me through without comment, though I knew by the amused looks that passed between them that I was merely beating the air.

"Then at last Jask spoke, and his manner was coldly, horribly polite. He said: 'I regret, Miss Wallington, that you should so misjudge us, but if this personal liberty is so valuable to you, no doubt you are prepared to pay well for it.'

"'So that's it; blackmail!'

"'On the contrary, accommodation—to the extent of fifty thousand pounds.'

"'Not a penny,' I flung at him.

"'But you will reconsider?'

"'No!'

"'Then you prefer your dollars to your liberty, perhaps to your life? A thousand pities. But perhaps your obstinacy will relent under the skilful medical guidance of the incomparable Doctor Lal. He has a way with women, the good doctor, a way peculiarly his own. You will reconsider?'

"'No!'

" ' In that case the good doctor will have something to say.'

" Here the little Indian, who had continued to stare hard at me all this time, advanced and began to speak in a soft oily tone that made me shudder.

" I am a specialist, Miss Wallington, and as you know the fees of specialists are sometimes exorbitant. That, however, will be a matter of slight consideration to one in your position. I assume that what you want badly you will be able to pay for heavily. That is the great blessing of money ; it can buy luxuries, even husbands, who are not always a luxury. Frankly, I do not like you fiancé. He is a blunderer who does not understand or appreciate scientific research, and presently I propose to honour him with a little more of my attention.'

" Quite unable to follow the drift of all this I turned to the others for an explanation. Jask smiled ; Asterley, for so I must call him now, toyed with the lobes of his horrible ears. Darling, did you ever see such ears ! They reminded me of a picture I once saw of a satyr, and I suddenly grew afraid of him. Lal might be mad, and Jask a smooth, cunning scoundrel, but that man was a beast. And it was he who answered.

" You doubtless already realize, Miss Wallington, that coupled with our admiration for a beautiful woman, whom we are delighted and honoured to entertain, we are also men of business. It is a sad commentary on the vile nature of man that money should so frequently destroy both friendship and principle. Let us prove the exception ; let us prove the worthlessness of your dollars by disdaining their imaginary value.'

"Of course I knew that he was mocking me, and I hardened. The money was nothing, you know that; but I hated to think that those crooks believed they could get away with it so easily. Besides, I knew that as soon as you discovered my absence you would set to work, and as I did not anticipate any physical violence I continued to defy them.

"It was then Jask spoke again. 'I am afraid, Miss Wallington, that you do not fully comprehend the situation. Is it not better generously to agree to our terms than to constrain us to employ force? No, no, we are not torturers,' he added quickly, noticing the sudden look I flung at him. 'We shall proceed on the most scientific principles under the supervision of Doctor Lal. As I have already told you, the doctor has a way with women. He neither threatens nor commands; he *persuades*. You see, besides being a burning patriot, he has devoted his life to scientific research, particularly as it applies to what we call the will, or will-power, and he declares he has discovered a method of subjecting another person's will-power to his own. It is, as you must realize, a most important scientific discovery; or, if you do not realize it now, you probably will, let us say, within the next twenty-four hours. And, in case of disappointment, I should advise you not to entertain any hopes of rescue. You are your only rescuer, Miss Wallington, and you know how it may be effected.'

"Then he went to the door and called out 'Teska!' and a hard-faced woman entered. She did not look at me, but stood like a statue listening to him while he spoke in some foreign language, not a word of which I understood.

"He explained. 'This is Teska, a very worthy soul. I have told her that she is to show you every attention, on pain of my displeasure. Now you will retire with her and consider the proposition that has been laid before you, and may I take the liberty of advising you to consider it well.'

"With that he nodded to the woman, who advanced in her stiff hard way and touched me on the arm. We went out together. At the end of the passage she opened a door and motioned for me to enter. It was a wretched little room, small and inconvenient, ill-furnished, and altogether most depressing. But there was a bright fire in the grate, and I knelt before it to warm my hands, which were horribly cold.

"As you may imagine, I was both frightened and perplexed, though I doubt if I as yet fully realized the situation, or how I had come to it; though I learnt afterwards that Jask was the driver of the taxi which had shadowed me, and Asterley the man who had pulled me down as soon as I stepped in.

"Furiously angered at being treated in this manner I promised myself all sorts of wild reprisals; but anger soon gave way to doubt, and doubt to despair. I kept thinking of the little Indian, his mad eyes, the way he looked at me, and the things Jask had said of him. What way had he with women, and what did he mean by that word *persuades*? To me it sounded fearfully sinister, and by degrees created panic. I began to think of all the horrors I had ever heard or imagined, and regretted that I had been so obstinate. What after all was money compared with one's life and happiness?

"I now turned to the woman who still stood looking

down at me, unemotional and indifferent. Was it possible to gain information from her; could she speak English? I asked her. To my joy she said she could.

"Then what does this mean; why am I brought here like this?"

"That is not my business," she answered.

"But don't you realize—"

"I realize nothing; my duty is to obey."

"But you are breaking the law."

"I obey," she said again, but refused further to discuss the matter.

I asked myself if it was a willing or a forced obedience; even put the question to her. She shrugged her shoulders. She was cold, hard, unyielding, like a stone.

"Listen," I said, "I am rich. If it's money you want I can and will pay well. Get in touch with my friends—May Fair Hotel. You will not regret it."

A bitter smile curled her hard, bitter lips.

"You will sleep there," she said, pointing to the couch.

"Sleep! Dearest, can you imagine the agony of that night? I thought it would never pass, and yet in a way I dreaded its passing, for I knew it would bring me once more in contact with those awful men. The dreams I had, the fearful dreams, and in them all that little Indian doctor stared at me with his mad eyes. Sometimes he grew to enormous proportions; sometimes he squatted like a toad and spat at me. I woke up calling to you.

"In the morning, revived by the tea and bread and butter the woman brought me, I was once more led

into the room where I had first interviewed my abductors. They were all smiles and compliments, with the exception of Lal, who never opened his mouth, but who stared at me with devouring eyes. Jask was suave, polite, conciliatory, a polished man of the world; Asterley, with his satyr's ears, was frankly a beast, but Lal with his air of preoccupation, his apparent detachment from the world, was an enigma, and I feared him infinitely more than the others. Asterley's glances were merely rude and objectionable, but the Indian's eyes were looking right through me in a way that numbed my brain.

"As in the room I had left, so in this one, the light was full on, the heavy curtains drawn across the window, though I knew it was day. But I pretended not to notice it, obstinately determined not to betray the slightest indication of my true feelings. Knowing that they were after money, I could not believe that they would really harm me till they got it. Meanwhile you would know now and be moving heaven and earth, you, and George, and his police.

"After expressing the hope that I had passed a good night—I knew the wretch was mocking me—Jask reverted to his proposition of the fifty thousand pounds. I pointed out that that was a large sum of money, and to negotiate it successfully would be no easy matter. Questions would be asked which might be difficult to answer. Hadn't they overstepped the bounds of discretion? Jask looked at me and smiled.

"'Ah, yes,' he said, 'it is natural for you to think in terms of dollars. But is it not possible that you over-estimate their importance? You smile; you think not. I do not blame you. How could a Princess

of Dollars think differently—until taught? This particular teaching may seem hard to absorb, Princess, but doubtless you will prove an apt pupil. Meanwhile we shall esteem it a great honour to entertain you for just a little while longer. And don't distress yourself unduly over the difficulties of dollar-reaping. You may trust us to find a way of gathering in the harvest.'

" Making whatever I might of this he nodded to Teska, who again conducted me to my room; and there I remained for the rest of the day, my nerves throbbing, my head aching.

" I must have developed a temperature during the night. Early the next morning, or what I imagined to be the next morning, no daylight being allowed to enter the room, Lal came in and began questioning me as to the state of my health. He wanted to feel my pulse, but I would not let him. He stared hard at me without speaking. That staring silence of his was terrifying. Then he went over to the wash-stand and I saw him empty something into a glass.

" ' You are feverish,' he said, returning; ' please drink this. You will find it extremely soothing.'

" Fearing him, I refused. He then nodded to the woman, who immediately flung her arms round me and held me fast while he forced the stuff between my lips. I spat it out, or as much of it as I could, but I was held in such a way that I had to swallow some. Exhausted with the struggle I lay back quivering. He looked down at me neither smiling nor frowning. Then he suddenly turned and went out without a word.

" Was this his way with women, his way of subjecting them to his will? Imagine my horror. What

would be the end of it all? I appealed to Teska for help; I promised her riches, liberty, everything I could think of. But she only stared at me. Sometimes I thought there was a look of sympathy in her eyes, but feared it was created by the wish to find it.

"Lal came again and again. My resistance weakened; I knew that it was weakening. I felt ill, dreadfully ill. I refused to eat fearing the food was doped. For hours at a time I would lie on the couch staring at nothing. Day and night were the same. Sometimes I burned as though I were on fire; at other times I shook and shivered with the cold. They did not come again to talk money, though I wished they would. They could have had all for the asking.

"Then came the night when they brought me in to see you. At first I did not recognize you, I was so weak, so ill. It all seemed like a nightmare. I could not understand why you did not come to me when I called."

She broke off shuddering. I tried my best to soothe her; I implored her to cease. I understood. There was no necessity to tell me more. It was all over now, a thing of the past, best forgotten. She smiled, shook her head, and continued as though there had been no interruption to the narrative.

"Shortly after returning to my cell Doctor Lal entered and told Teska to prepare. I looked at him.

"'We are moving to our house in the country,' he explained. 'Please do not distress yourself,' he continued mockingly, 'I promise you shall receive every attention.' I asked him where you were, what had become of you. He smiled. 'Leathermouth, the

clever one, the very clever one. He has gone on a long journey from which I fear he will never return.'

"' You have killed him ! '

"' I sweep aside all who cross my path,' he replied. ' It is dangerous to cross my path. Many have tried and failed. I hated him, I hate all the white race with their airs of superiority. But as regards Leather-mouth, the man you were to marry, I will tell you something. He was getting dangerous. Already he had discovered my secret, and it is not good for any man to know that. Now he is dead, choked with slime, and that secret has gone with him. He was clever, oh yes, but not as clever as I, or he would not have fallen so easily into the trap. Shall I tell you how ? It was the Sign of the Glove. I see you understand. When Leo Jask, calling himself Captain Asterley, visited you at the May Fair Hotel, you kept him waiting. He opened a book, *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*. You know what he found pasted inside the cover ? Later, the same label was discovered in your handbag. Then Jask vaguely remembered some old story he had heard in the East of a glove being used as a sign. *Gant*—Gantian. You follow ? The rest was easy. Doubtless it will console you to know that through your folly you helped to destroy him. Now you go with us ; we shall have further use for you. But he is gone, that lover of yours, and all your dollars cannot bring him back again. That which enabled you to purchase luxury while others starved and rotted could not save him, nor shall it save you. Already you are mine, Princess Dollar ; presently you shall be wholly mine. Then

you may call on your dollars and see how they will answer you."

" His eyes blazed furiously, madly. He came so close that I thought he was going to strike me. But he merely stared. Then suddenly swinging round left the room.

" What little strength that remained seemed to fail me. I offered no resistance when they came to take me away. Though I remember being gagged I have no recollection of who did it. I was swathed in a blanket, even my face being covered, caught up in somebody's arms, carried away and placed in a car. I knew by the subsequent motion that it was a car of some sort.

" I must have fainted, for when I again opened my eyes I was in a strange room and the gag had been removed from my mouth. Teska gave me something to drink. I no longer cared what I ate or drank; I rather wished it might be poison. What did anything matter now? You were gone, my brain was weak and confused, and I hadn't an ounce of strength left. Lal had a way with women. I was no longer capable of shuddering at the thought.

" But if it was poison she had administered it proved a gracious antidote to lassitude, so that when I was again confronted by my captors I was able to talk to them with some semblance of reason. Or rather to Jask, for it was he who did the talking. The other two looked on, the one glaring in his mad way, the other smiling and stroking the lobes of his hideous ears.

" And the subject of his talk was—money. I was now in a reasonable frame of mind, was I not, and

prepared to listen to certain proposals? I told him yes, that I was quite prepared to do anything he wished. I was weary of everything and sighed for oblivion, and you.

" Of what he said further I cannot remember, but as through a mist I seemed to hear him congratulating me on my good sense, and saying that he would at once proceed to make 'arrangements.' Presently all should be well. This assurance neither excited nor depressed my spirit. I had no spirit. I was like one already dead.

" And just then Teska seemed to grow more human. Her tone was kinder; she implored me to eat and drink. Her hand as she stroked my forehead soothed me. Perhaps she thought I was dying. I don't know. I only know that I began to cry, and that she took my handkerchief from my breast and gently wiped the tears. Amazed at this act of kindness I think I must have cried the more, and was still crying when I heard her whisper in my ear, 'Look!' In the centre of the handkerchief was one of the labels. It must have stuck there, and I had been too distressed to notice it.

" 'This is the Sign of the Glove that that devil spoke of?' she asked.

" 'Yes.'

" 'If your friends could find it they would know how to act?'

" 'Yes.'

" 'They will be searching for you?'

" 'Everywhere. What are you going to do?'

" She placed a finger to her lips, listened intently for a few moments, and quietly left the room. Appre-

hensively I waited, doubting, fearing. Presently she came in again, moving as softly as a shadow. Leaning over me she whispered, 'I have cast your bread upon the waters. It's one chance in a million. Perhaps there is a God in Heaven.'

"'What have you done?'

"'Given it to the wind; it was all I could do. It is blowing a gale; God knows what will happen to it. Perhaps the gale will be merciful.'

"I caught her rough hand and pressed it. 'If ever—' I began. But she cut me short.

"'Promise nothing. I hate them! They are devils; they forced me into this. We are both women; I understand. We can only hope. No, I don't want money; something better, stronger, something that money can't buy.'

"Darling, what more is there to tell? There is a God in Heaven, and the gale was merciful. You came as I knew you would if you were alive, though I believed you dead. And just before you came Lal appeared and gagged me once more, out of sheer cruelty, I think. But what does that matter now; what does anything matter now? "

CHAPTER XIX

THE THREE MUSKETEERS

THE escape of Jask was the only shadow on our happiness. That he would be at large for long I did not believe with George Mayford's young men assiduously searching every hole and corner. In any case, if he were in England he would scarcely show his face, or one of his many faces. My own belief was that he would contrive to slip abroad. Accustomed to danger and the various changes of fortune, such a man would need be in a bad way indeed not to know how to deal with them. Julia was still fearful of him and a possible revenge, her apprehensions needing much persuasion before they could be quieted. She would scarcely move a yard without companionship, and at night had a guard placed in the corridor outside her apartment.

Meanwhile the date for our interrupted wedding was fixed, but this time it really was to be a quiet affair. Not more than half a dozen intimate friends were to be invited. George Mayford was to give her away, and Albert was to be best man. It was she who suggested this, much to my joy. Her gratitude for what he had done was unbounded. How should we ever repay him ; what was there we could do for him ?

"If he would only marry," she said, "we could buy him a house and settle a nice income on him, but I don't believe he has any other ambition than to be with you."

"And you. He adores you, and thinks you're as brave as you are beautiful."

"He's a dear, and I just love him. But for him I should now be the most miserable woman in the world instead of being the happiest. We've got to fix him up somehow. John always said he was the greatest guy ever, and what will he think of us if we don't adequately reward? Personally, I don't see how we can do it outwardly, for his reward is in our hearts. All the same we've got to do something."

"His reward is in knowing what we think of him."

"I want something more than that, something tangible. Surely you're not stumped for ideas? What about Elsie? They seem to get along pretty well now that she's got used to him, and would you believe it, she calls him Bertie."

"No!"

"I've heard her."

"Thank Heaven it wasn't Bert!"

"Why?"

"He hates it; he'd never have forgiven her. Even I wouldn't dare. It's his one weakness. I often think it awakes a memory which I wouldn't broach for the world."

Then I told her of Flo, the sergeant-major down at Sevenoaks, explaining that I didn't think there was much in it. In fact, I was sure there wasn't, as he seemed curiously afraid to venture on such a doubtful enterprise.

"Not engaged?" she asked.

"Oh dear, no; chiefly gratitude, I think. She's been good to his mother."

"Albert's mother! I'd just love to meet her. You must run me down."

"With his permission."

"Of course."

"Meanwhile Elsie calls him Bertie."

"Don't you think it's most promising? She's a real good child and ought to make him happy. And what a husband! I've told her there are three men in the world who are good enough for any woman—my Three Musketeers—and Albert's one of them. I guess you can fix the other two."

The next few days passed gloriously. We were always together. With joy I watched the colour return to her cheeks. Gradually the ordeal through which she had passed seemed to become a memory, painful when recalled, but nothing more. Even the fear that Jask might be lurking somewhere in the shadows ready to strike was forgotten. For myself, I did not think he would trouble us any more. His only security lay in vanishment. Besides, I did not believe he would risk capture merely to strike a blow. He was a cautious fellow, cold-blooded, calculating, one who had known defeat as well as victory. His philosophy would enable him to laugh at failure; the world was wide and fools were plentiful. That he had an insuperable objection to murder, crude, or as a fine art, was beside the mark; but that he had a sincere regard for his own neck I did not doubt.

Nor did Mrs. Asterley loom very portentously on the horizon. George and Julia and I discussed her

case at some length. The official spoke sternly of a prosecution for "criminal conspiracy," or some such term, but the man was amenable to persuasion. She had been beaten, and would experience all the misery and degradation of defeat. Whatever claws she might once have had were effectually clipped. Julia appealed for her. After all, she was a woman, friendless and alone. Her shame would be always with her. Wasn't that punishment enough?

And then, the Sunday afternoon before our marriage, while Julia and I were sitting down to tea before a roaring fire, the telephone went. She looked at me and frowned. Elsie appeared. Julia nodded a negative. I smiled. But to our surprise Elsie said, "Hold the line a minute." Then turning to me, "It's Floyd, sir. He wants to speak to you."

Floyd! I wish she had called him Bertie.

"Well?" I asked.

"Just a minute, sir."

I heard him speak to somebody, and that somebody spoke to me. I could scarcely credit my ears.

"Wally!" I cried.

"Sure," came his well-known voice.

"When did you arrive?"

"Just this minute. Hopped over from Paris by plane."

"Edna?"

"Splendid! We're coming round right away."

"Then hurry." I turned to Julia with a smile.

"John!" she gasped. "Isn't this great!"

She was all a-flutter with excitement. Got up and looked at herself in the glass, patted her hair into position, which I with my clumsy hands had probably

ruffled, dabbed a powder-puff on her nose, and then looked at me as much as to say, "Will I do?" Next Elsie was ordered to bustle. More cups and saucers. Visitors, precious visitors! Mr. John and his wife! Hurry, girl, hurry!

What a reunion! She sprang into her brother's arms, then hugged Edna, and shook hands with Albert, who stood modestly by the door, his grim face wreathed with smiles. After that I was permitted to shake hands with Wally and kiss my own sister. And how splendid she looked, and—and quite a woman. Wally too looked in the pink, and as handsome as ever.

Elsie brought in more cups and saucers. Albert turned to the door, but Julia stopped him, and I thought it was one of the nicest acts of courtesy I had ever seen, and I loved her more than ever for it.

"You mustn't go," she said; "you're taking tea with us. Please sit down."

"Sure, son," said Wally, "here beside me." He laid his hand affectionately on Albert's shoulder and pushed him on to a chair. "Now, then, what's it all about?"

"First," I said, "tell us how you happen to be here?"

"Easily explained, Peter. We were in Constantinople. Edna wanted to see that singing-place where we first met. Remember it, son?" I smiled. "Well, in that smelly burg I came across a copy of *The Times*, an old copy, and in it I saw that advertisement about 'West being best for Leathermouth.' I guess I tumbled to it at once. You were in trouble again and I wasn't in it with you. Then I drove the

old *Manhattan* as hard as she could go for Naples. We trained from there to Paris, then hopped aboard a flier. Now what have you got to tell me ? "

I looked at Julia ; she nodded. Briefly I told him what had happened, much too briefly for his satisfaction. He questioned closely, appealing now to Julia and now to Albert. In this manner he got a fair grasp of the whole story. *

" And to think I wasn't in on it," he said regretfully.

" What do you make of that, Mr. Floyd ? "

" We missed you, sir," Albert replied, apologetically.

" And I suppose it's the quiet life now ? " he grinned.

" We hope so, sir."

" I know so," said Julia, emphatically.

" So do I," said Edna with equal emphasis. The three culprits looked at each other.

" Well, I agree," said Wally, " there's nothing like it. But the next time . . . "

" There's going to be no next time," Julia asserted.

" Sister, you've said it." Then he turned to me with a curious, self-conscious smile. " Edna and I have decided to go down to your old home and wait."

" Wait ! " cried Julia. " What are you going to wait for ? "

" Just a woman's fancy," he said.

Edna hid her flaming face in Julia's neck. Then the two girls rose hurriedly and went into the next room.

" And so it's to be to-morrow, pard ? "

" Yes, please God."

" Amen. I guess we'll see it through this time without a hitch. What about a bottle of wine, Albert ? "

"Very good, sir. Sweet or dry?"

"Which do the ladies like best?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Then go and find out."

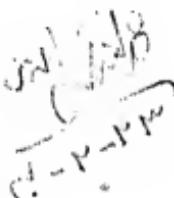
"Yes, sir."

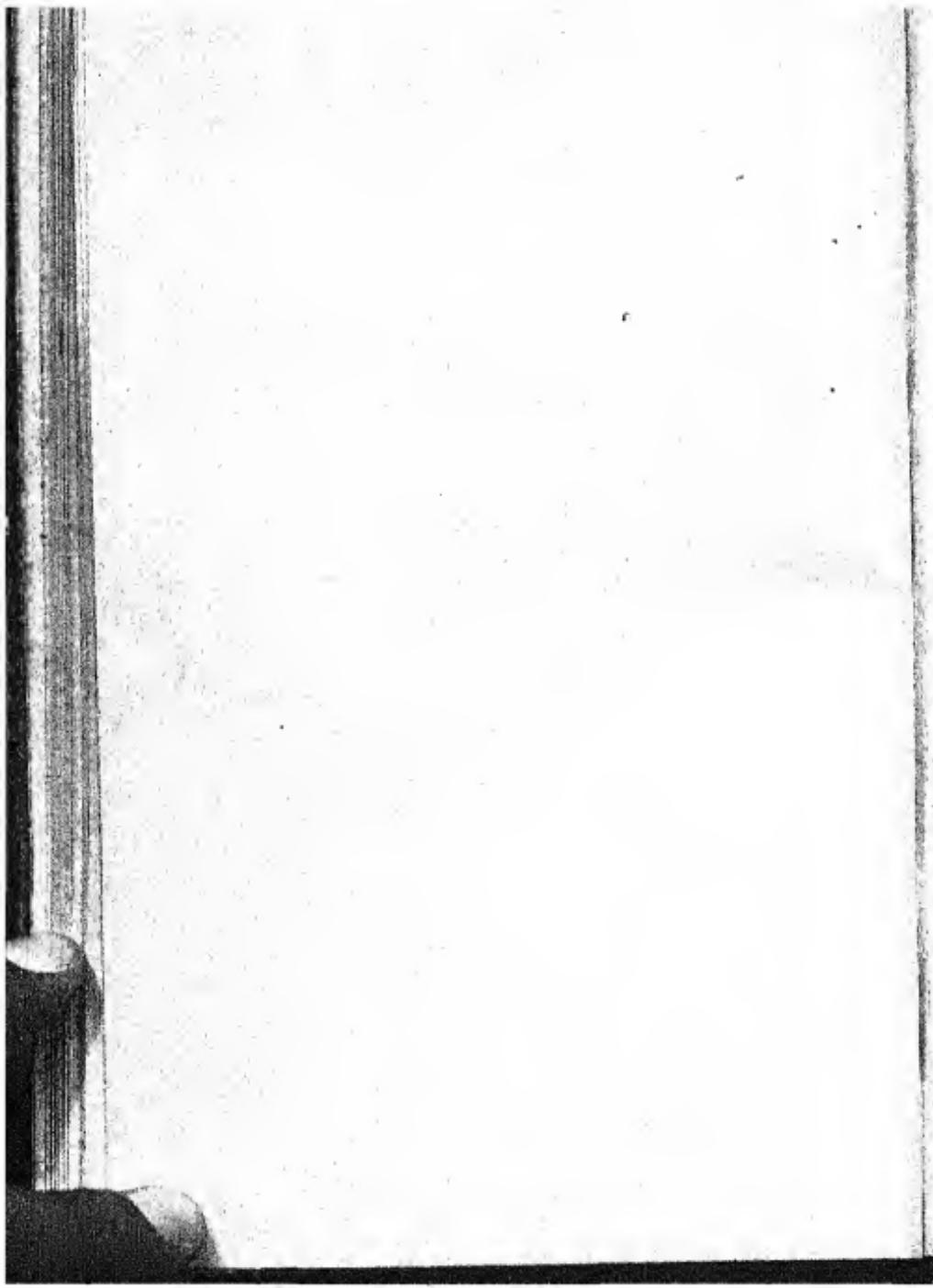
With the wine the ladies reappeared. First the health of one was proposed, then the other, and for a final toast Julia bade us charge our glasses. Albert would have stolen away, but she called him back and handed him his glass.

"This is a very happy, a very glorious moment for us all," she said. "We'll forget what has been and remember only what is to be. Peter, John, Albert, take hands and never let go. Here's to the three men I love best on earth—my Three Musketeers."

And like three very gallant fellows we kissed the fair hand of our mistress and swore eternal allegiance.

THE END





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